

BLOWING THE LID OFF YUCCA MOUNTAIN

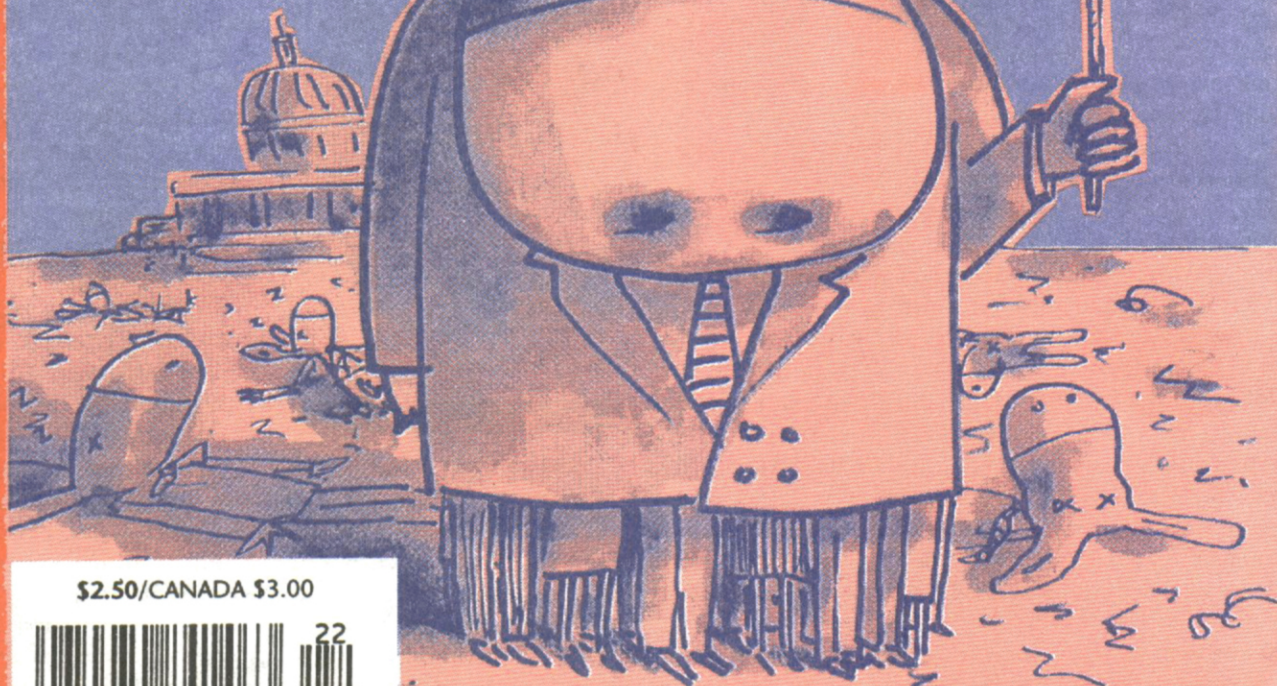
May 29 - June 11, 1995

# In THESE TIMES

the alternative newsmagazine

## THE LIFE OF THE PARTY

Can the Progressive  
Caucus revive  
the Democrats?



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By John Canham-Clyne



# EDITORIAL

## THE '60S LEGACY TO THE VIOLENT RIGHT

**T**he anger and hostility to government that led to the Oklahoma City bombing remind some pundits and academics of the New Left's lunatic fringe. They see today's militias as a legacy of the earlier movement, despite the obvious political differences between the '90s militias and the '60s left. On the face of things, there are similarities. After 1969, when the Students for a Democratic Society flew apart in a fit of frustration and despair, some New Leftists made bombs and used them, while others bought guns and went up into the hills behind Berkeley and other cities and engaged in target practice and other pseudo-military games.

And beyond these superficial resemblances both groups have shared a conviction that the government has betrayed its promises. As Gerald Marwell, a sociologist at the University of Wisconsin, notes, "What happened in the '60s was that the government was successfully 'delegitimated.'" Before the '60s, Marwell suggests, government was trusted, but then "we were told" that "the emperor had no clothes and people shouldn't accept what they're told. And rather than going away, that sensibility has grown over the last 30 years."

But the interesting thing about this formulation is that it puts the blame on the New Left, rather than on policy-makers in government and the corporate media, who are clearly more culpable in fueling public cynicism about government. After all, throughout our history we have been told by some people that the emperor has no clothes, but only rarely has this created a significant popular opposition. The issue, therefore, is not whether the New Left began the process of delegitimation, but why its criticism struck a chord in the '60s, and why—even though the left collapsed—that "sensibility" has continued to grow ever since.

The New Left grew because it vigorously opposed a government that violated the democratic ideals it claimed to uphold—at home by sanctioning racial segregation and oppression, and abroad by fighting a neocolonial war in Vietnam while consistently lying about its nature and progress. But the New Left disintegrated when, despite its success in mobilizing public opinion in favor of civil rights and against the war, one small part of it fell into feckless fits of violence as it became increasingly marginalized at the end of the '60s.

Now the extreme right is growing as its attacks on government strike a similar chord—this time among the many in small-town and rural America who are seeing the

promise of opportunity and security slipping ever further from their grasp. As hundreds of thousands of small farmers have been driven off their land and millions of well-paying jobs have been eliminated, countless numbers of families now have to work harder for less. In that situation, resentment of those who are better off, or who are seen as receiving special privileges, is easily exploited by racist and ultranationalist leaders. And when federal agents murder the wife and son of a white supremacist holed up in a mountain cabin,

and then provoke the slaughter of 78 people in the Branch Davidian headquarters in Waco, it is easy to fixate on the U.S. government as a convenient target. So, yes, both the '60s left and today's right have focused on government as the problem—but today's militia movement, unlike the New Left, has made no attempt to change or influence the government through the political process.

Even so, by refusing to take on the task of defining the good society, and by laying the groundwork for what is now called identity politics, the '60s left helped prepare the ground for the emergence of today's right. As historian Michael Kazin has written, the '60s left "only discredited the old order without laying the political foundation for a new one." Since the '60s, the right has hardly had a new idea, much less a universal vision of liberty and equality. Yet the left has surrendered its vision of a universal politics and a new participatory democracy and accepted the framework provided by the right. True, as historian Arthur H. Williamson has written, "a fragmented scattering of pseudo-lefts" did emerge after the '60s, and these lefts did

*By abandoning universal principles, the left has contributed to the rise of the politics of resentment.*

urge radical programs. But they did so within the framework of the individualistic, interest-group politics of ethnicity or gender—thereby helping indirectly to create the "angry white male" and militia-style ultranationalism.

And even now, too many liberals and others on the left oppose the right simply by embracing the benefits provided

by "government," while ignoring the question of who our government serves and who and what it should serve. But in a society in which government has increasingly become the pliant instrument of corporate and financial institutions, and in which our public discourse is based on acceptance of this principle, the left must ask and answer this question. In order to do so, the left must transcend what is acceptable discourse and pursue a majoritarian vision of a just society beyond the competing claims of interest-based politics. ◀

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 "...with liberty and justice for all"

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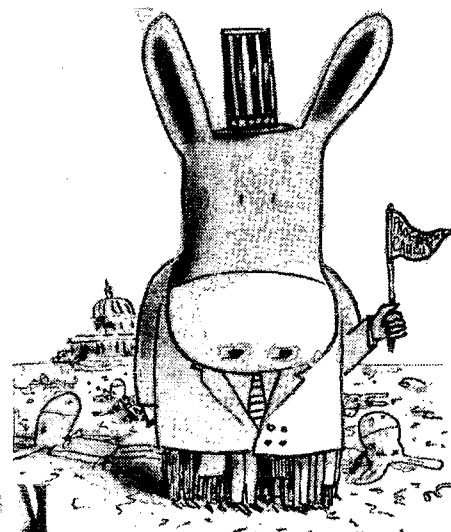
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# LETTERS

## Play ball!

"It's millionaires vs. billionaires," says David Moberg in his otherwise good piece on the baseball mess (*ITT*, May 1). Come on, David, do your homework.

The majority of big league players make between the \$109,000 minimum and \$500,000. The much-trumpeted million-dollar average is wildly skewed by the preposterous multimillion-dollar bundles handed out by the same idiot owners who don't have the sense to share the television bounty with the weaker market cities, as pro football does so successfully. The median salary, a much truer yardstick, is below \$500,000. Before the strike, 269 players earned less than \$200,000. Of those, 110 received the minimum. If all this still sounds to the average worker like an awful lot of dough for playing ball, please be reminded that the average big leaguer's career lasts less than six years.

The sloppy "they're a bunch of millionaires" concept certainly helped for-

mulate the predominant fan reaction of "a plague on both their houses." It helps obscure what should be the real story, especially for a pro-labor publication: Those sterling sportsmen, the Reinsdorfs, Seligs, Steinbrenners, Schotts, et al, set out to break the union and dictate a return to the good old days of feudal contracts. In the current atmosphere, they confidently counted on players panicking and returning meekly to the fold. Lo and behold, on the very verge of a scab ball season, not one major league player had broken ranks. The owners had to back down, albeit temporarily.

Here's one loud cheer for the baseball players, millionaires and all.

Lester Rodney  
Walnut Creek, Calif.

## Corporate welfare

In "Cutting corporate aid" (*ITT*, April 17), David Moberg quotes me as describing Essential Information's rep-

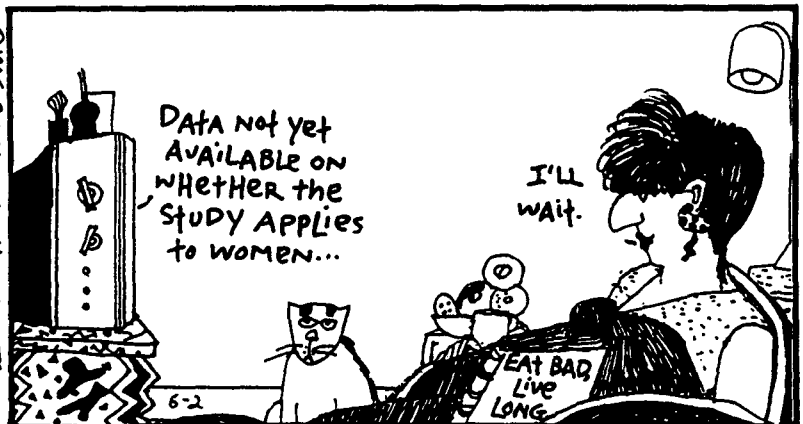
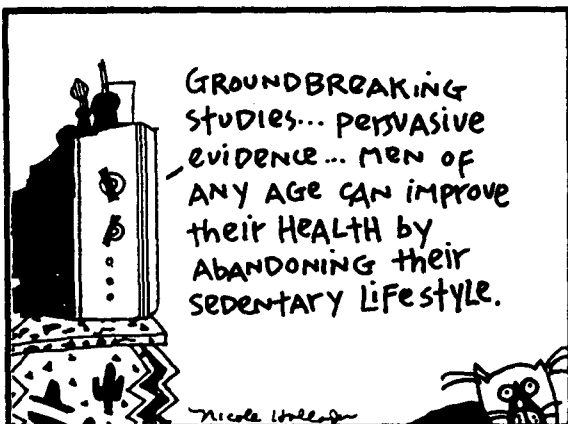
ports on corporate welfare as "attacking corporate power." But Moberg claims that governmental corruption caused by corporate power will continue even if corporate welfare is eliminated.

Groups from the left to the right argue that corporate welfare results from governmental corruption caused by corporate power. Essential Information, the Cato Institute and the Progressive Policy Institute (PPI) cite concerns about corporate power and influence as reasons to reduce or eliminate corporate welfare. According to Cato, "[t]he major effect of corporate subsidies is to divert credit and capital to politically well-connected firms at the expense of their less politically influential competitors." PPI contends that "many current subsidies and protections have come not from economic logic but from political influence first exercised long ago." If corporate welfare were eliminated—especially corporate welfare defined in its broadest sense to include subsidies, tax breaks and business-protection laws—one reason for governmental corruption by corporate power would be eradicated.

Additionally, Moberg says that criticism of corporate welfare "implicitly accepts the legitimacy of the assault on welfare for the poor." Essential Information's reports on *Aid for Dependent Corporations* do not implicitly or explicitly accept assaults on welfare for the poor. Instead, we criticize wealthy, free-market corporations on the public dole for more than \$167 billion per

SYLVIA

by Nicole Hollander





year. We recommend reductions in and restrictions on corporate welfare, not cuts in payments to needy families and children.

**Janice C. Shields**

Coordinator, Corporate Welfare Project  
Essential Information  
Washington, D.C.

## Deadly ritual

I have to respond to Shawn Neidorf's article, "Sticking points" ("In Short," *ITT*, April 17). I keep hearing and reading about the effectiveness of needle-exchange programs, and I wonder what drug culture these people who tout the exchange have been associated with. As a former drug user and a former drunk, I feel knowledgeable enough to comment on the issue.

Drug users are much like drunks who buy a jug of Muscatel, throw the cap away and pass the bottle around in a display of camaraderie with their drinking buddies. The passing around of the bottle is an important part of the rite of drinking among those drunks who are inclined to be comrades of the street. The sharing of a needle is the same display of camaraderie among drug users. In using drugs as well as alcohol, the rite is as important as the use itself. Marijuana smokers roll one joint at a time and pass it around, sharing it around the table in the same manner.

When intravenous drug users are ready to shoot up with friends, they don't each prepare a load for themselves. The syringe is loaded with enough to go around, then the first shooter sticks a vein and draws a bit of blood to make sure the needle is in the vein, then injects his share of the load. Then the load is passed to the next, who in turn draws a bit of blood in the same manner as the first, and injects his hit. Thus if two or three people are shooting up, the only one who is not getting a contaminated needle and its contents is the first shooter. You may provide all the clean needles in the world and it will not change the rite of needle-sharing.

As everyone knows, the HIV virus is easy to kill. If the users are concerned about the problem, they would simply wash the needles and syringes in hot soapy water and maybe wash them with Clorox or some other disinfectant. Since the virus cannot live without moisture, one could simply dry the equipment in the sun. There are easy ways to clean needles and syringes, but needle-sharers do not care, or they would take simple steps to protect themselves.

**Bill Melton**  
Oklahoma City

## Specters of English departments

In spite of Rick Perlstein's best efforts to praise Jacques Derrida's *Specters of Marx* for its "verbal magic" (*ITT*, April 17), it is difficult not to believe that his conclusion is that Derrida's thoughts on Marxism and politics are irrelevant.

But one ought to ask, to whom is Derrida irrelevant? It would appear that Perlstein's answer to this question is familiar: "people sweating, struggling, shedding blood." It reminds me of an experience I have had on more than one occasion: One makes the mistake of writing and thinking about Marx, only to make the unhappy discovery that for American socialists "the real revolution is happening not in the library but in the streets."

Obscured here is American socialism's anti-intellectualism, its unwitting complicity with right-wing "intellectuals" like William Bennett who condemn the jargon-addled "theorists" for an irrelevance of another kind, and its continued commitment to a one-dimensional notion of political resistance.

What is it that Perlstein would require of Derrida before he could acknowledge value in his work? Apparently he has to be more compelling than Marx! (Perlstein: "Out-freak the freak.") Perlstein, like most American socialists, has a strong tendency to want to think in monolithic

terms. The "truth" of Marx cannot tolerate the qualifications of other perspectives and remain Marx. Thus the revisionist Derrida, like the renegade Kautsky before him, must be found finally irrelevant. Yet over the course of the last 25 years Derrida's thought and "post-structuralism" have had the following consequences:

1. It has provided an autonomous form of thought that has brought American intellectuals into contact with a philosophical tradition deeply hostile to the ideology of capitalism early and late. It has made critique a central function of the teaching of reading. This largely academic event has had the unlikely consequence of turning English departments into a national threat capable of stimulating the kind of right-wing rhetoric usually reserved for the likes of Khadafy and Noriega. According to George Will, English departments are the lairs of the "watery Marxists." I don't think Perlstein would put it any differently.

2. Without deconstruction, it is difficult to imagine the following political and cultural movements of the last 20 years: ACT-UP, feminist theory, slackers, cultural studies, postmodernism, and even the often hyperreal revolution offered by the meta-revolutionary Subcomandante Marcos, who conducts his war against capitalism on e-mail and in orchestrated "spectacles" as well as in the jungles of Chiapas. Yes, Rick Perlstein, Subcomandante Marcos, aka Rafael Guillén, wrote his senior thesis on Louis Althusser. But Althusser was not Che Guevara! It was Althusser, not Derrida, who argued that Marx's pitiable lamentations about the "blood" of the worker were "pre-Marxist."

Finally, Perlstein condemns a Derrida who is largely a phantasm (of the detached philosopher) and praises a Marcos who is equally phantasmal (the heroic revolutionary "in the streets"). All in the name of that ultimately phantasmal specter to which American socialists bring their tears like worshippers bathing the plaster feet of the Madonna: the People.

**Curtis White**  
Normal, Ill.

# InSHORT



## Chained melody

Chain gangs in Alabama are here again, and state corrections commissioner Ron Jones is downright enthusiastic about the revival. According to the *Washington Post*,



Jones even claims that the chains are the "humane" choice for work gangs—by

reducing the chances for inmates to escape, you see, chains reduce the chances that inmates will be *shot* trying to escape. "I don't want them shot," Jones notes. "It's expensive. You shoot someone, and you send him to the hospital, and it costs \$100,000 to patch him up." Jones is quite the penny-pincher, having already removed cable television from the state's prisons—and coffee as well, except for Sunday mornings.

## Pink slipup

Bill Means taught his daughter more than she needed to know about contemporary corporate culture on this year's Take Our Daughters to Work Day. Means, an engineer at Structural Dynamics Research Corp. in Cincinnati, Ohio, arrived at his job this April 27 with his daughter in tow—only to find his job was no



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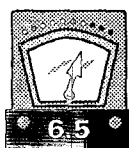
## THE BUDWORM SYSTEM

**L**ike a desperately ill patient being wheeled into the operating room for emergency surgery, the public forests of the Western United States are about to go under the knife (or rather, the chain saw) to resolve what is being described as a "forest health crisis."

In December, the U.S. Forest Service, citing a record 1994 forest fire sea-



longer there. He had been laid off. The company, for its part, denies that it ruined the day for 8-year-old Marisa



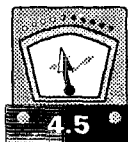
Means on purpose: they didn't know she was there.

"We're so sorry about this that I

don't know how I could express it," the company's vice president told the Associated Press. "It's just made us look like very bad people."

## History's bunk

Bill Clinton presumably looked long and hard before settling on John W. Carlin, a former Kansas governor and the CEO of Midwest Superconductivity, as the nominee for the position of national archivist. There is just one little drawback: Carlin, who supported Clinton in the 1992 campaign, is opposed almost unanimously by historians and archivists, who say he's not even remotely qualified for the job.



"The most serious problem was that he didn't have any idea what the

job was about," Tim Ericson, archives director at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, told the *New York Times*. "When we asked him about what interested him about the job, he couldn't come up with one single thing."

## APPALL-O-METER SCALE

1. Models Inc.-redible!
2. Infomercial irritating
3. Plausibly deniable
4. L.A.P.D. blue
5. Bob Dole-icious
6. Raoul Cédras-tic
7. Ode North nasty
8. Holiday in Rwanda
9. Zhdanovskyesque
10. Where have you gone, Joe Goebbels?

son, called for the "salvage logging" of 1.5 billion board feet of lumber nationwide. The bulk of the salvage logging is slated to come from the interior regions of the Pacific Northwest, where a spruce budworm infestation has killed many trees. Service officials argue that forests that have grown too dense and insect-infested—partly because of decades of relentless fire suppression by the service—should be thinned to reduce fire dangers.

But environmentalists see another agenda in the salvage logging proposals of the service, which derives a great deal of its income from timber sales. Trees from the interior Northwest defoliated by the spruce budworm have been the poster children of the "forest health crisis." But the budworm outbreak dates back to 1980, and the infestation has been on the decline since 1993. The talk of a "health crisis" has another source, according to Roy Keene of the Eugene, Ore.-based Public Forestry Foundation. Keene says that salvage logging is a way for the service to maintain timber sales in the face of court decisions that have reduced logging in ancient forests along the Pacific Northwest's Cascade and Coast ranges. The 1.5 billion board feet under consideration for "salvage" sale significantly boost the 3.6 billion board feet the service has slated for timber sales this year.

Forest advocates hope to be able to use administrative appeals and court action to slow or halt an environmentally unsound and illegal salvage logging program. But the Republican Congress is trying to block the courthouse door. In March, both the Senate and House passed an appropriations bill that contained a rider exempting the program from public review. Sen. Mark Hatfield (R-OR), a strong backer of the timber industry, placed his full clout as Appropriations Committee chair behind the rider, which is similar to one he successfully pushed in 1989.

If the rider becomes law, forest activists fear it will allow federal land agencies to circumvent logging restrictions virtually anywhere in public forests. Mark Hubbard, conservation director of the Oregon Natural Resources Council, says, "You only have to call it 'forest health' and you can take green trees."

The Native Forest Council's Phil Nanas, who tracks many timber sales, says: "I have yet to see a sale this year that's not a salvage sale. Every timber sale can be construed in some way to be a salvage or forest health sale. This rider will open the way to all of them."

But the environmental movement and the forests have apparently dodged a bullet, at least for now. President Clinton, primarily because he disagreed with the appropriations bill's deep cuts in social spending, has announced that he will employ his first veto against it.

Clinton was helped to his decision by a full-scale environmentalist offensive. Until recently, the salvage logging issue was not even on the president's radar, notes Andy Stahl, executive director of the Association of Forest Service Employees for Environmental Ethics. But by the time of the veto announcement, the White House had been deluged with anti-rider sentiment.

That gives environmentalists hope that they can forestall a salvage logging binge. But public land agencies are still committed to an agenda that favors a massive "forest health" program. This will no doubt be a source of continuing struggle between agencies and environmental advocates. If the salvage logging rider stays dead, it simply offers a more level playing field.

The threat of the rider led some forest activists to begin talking about a return to '80s-style civil disobedience. "I've always played it straight and within the system," Andy Kerr, executive director of the Oregon Natural

Resources Council, wrote in a column for the *Oregonian*. But if they're shut out of the courts, he adds, environmentalists will have little choice but to pursue direct action.

—Patrick Mazza

## SINS OF OMISSION

**T**he job of the journalist, so the mythology goes, is much like that of a police inspector—carefully prying truths from the recalcitrant, inducing suspects to offer bewildered confessions by plying them with appropriately incisive questions. But in fact, the most successful journalists typically have attained their access, and their power, by tacitly agreeing to give their subjects what they want. "It's my job to take the news as [government officials] choose to give it to us," Jeff Gralnick, former executive producer of ABC's *World News Tonight*, once explained. "The evening newscast is not supposed to be the watchdog of the government."

Luckily, not everyone in the media agrees. But those who buck the system don't usually get airtime on *World News Tonight*. Every year many remarkable exposés remain unreported outside the small-circulation alternative magazines and newsletters in which they first appear.

Seeking to bring more attention to unjustly overlooked stories, Carl Jensen, a communications professor at Sonoma State University, founded Project Censored nearly two decades ago. Each year, Jensen and Project Censored have issued a list of the top 25 censored stories. The awards have become a minor media event in themselves. This year, the top 25 were chosen from a pool of some 700 submitted to the organization and judged by a panel of media critics, which included Noam Chomsky, Ben Bagdikian and Susan Faludi. You can read all about the stories chosen in the recently issued 1995 Project Censored yearbook, *Censored: The News that Didn't Make the News—and Why* (Four Walls Eight Windows).

Though unfamiliar, perhaps, to even the most diligent followers of mainstream media in America, not all the stories listed in Project Censored's Top 25 will be news to *In These Times* readers. That's because a number of them first appeared in *ITT*'s pages. Indeed, Joel Bleifuss' name appears an unprecedented three times in the list of the top 25. Bleifuss' "Right-Wing Confidential" (8/8/94), the No. 2 censored story of the year, described the workings of the Council for National Policy, a secretive organization bringing together conservative government officials, industrialists and Moral Majoritarians.

Bleifuss was also recognized for his reporting on FinCEN (5/30/94 and 6/13/94), a massive financial database that gives the Treasury Department unprecedented access to financial records worldwide. But the Treasury Department, as Bleifuss reports, has not even tried to use the powers at its disposal—which could be used to track the billions of dollars lost in the S&L scandals, potentially putting scores of well-heeled criminals behind bars. Bleifuss won further acclaim for his 1/24/94 column "How Now Mad Cow?" documenting the spread of the deadly mad cow disease to North American cattle herds.

*ITT*'s David Moberg was awarded the No. 5 spot for his "Full of Holes: Clinton's Retreat on the Ozone Crisis" (1/24/94). The presence of Al "Ozone Man" Gore in the White House has not exactly done wonders for the Earth's atmosphere, Moberg shows. Last year, in fact, the administra-

## MEDIA BEAT

By Pat Aufderheide

### Prostitute TV

When Ervin Duggan, head of the Public Broadcasting Service, compared a commercialized public TV to a prostitute in a speech last month to broadcasters, he scandalized bureaucrats and legislators.

But Duggan isn't apologizing. He apparently thinks bold talk will get the attention of his target audience—commercial broadcasters. His message: A public television unleashed from public funding is a new rival, and possibly a threatening one.

But while Duggan conjures dire images of painted ladies, public television is signing off on major deals that further blur the line between public and commercial. Ted Turner is now selling PBS home videos, and Disney is selling to commercial stations *Bill Nye the Science Guy*, which taxpayer money developed and PBS pioneered.

While public-private partnerships can combine strengths, they can also tilt the emphasis of public broadcasting. PBS just announced a \$15 million deal with MCI to start up an on-line service. The deal doesn't seem to do much for public TV's non-commercial side. Days after the deal was struck, PBS announced it was shrinking its educational on-line service, Learning Link, in a budget-cutting move.

Producers for public TV are also seizing the entrepreneurial moment. Soon after cable behemoth TCI bought into the MacNeil/Lehrer production house, Children's Television Workshop (CTW),



the largest producer of children's programming for media rights for *Sesame Street*—videos, movies, CDs, books—was sold to Sony. (There's a family connection, of sorts: The head of Sony-owned Columbia Studios is Lisa Henson, daughter of the creator of *Sesame Street*'s Muppets.) Public TV, which made the Muppets into stars but never invested in production, has no claim on CTW's successes.

### And by the way...

Public TV's annual documentary series *P.O.V.*, which showcases portraits and independent essays on American cultures (watch for the *ITT* review next issue), debuts June 6 (check local listings).

Oscar-nominated *Complaints of a Dutiful Daughter* launches the season. Director Deborah Hoffman's film depicts her attempts to come to terms with her mother's Alzheimer's disease, telling an inspiring story of a daughter and mother relearning their love for each other.

In the elegantly produced *Marketing Madness: A Survival Guide for a Consumer Society*, (\$18.95 pb, Westview Press, 5500 Central Ave., Boulder, CO 80301-2847), authors Michael F. Jacobson and Laurie Ann Mazur (from the Center for the Study of Commercialism) analyze everything from infomercials to billboards, from tobacco ads to Christmas hype.

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tion actually asked Du Pont to abandon its plans to stop manufacturing chlorofluorocarbons—presenting the move as a “favor,” of sorts, to car owners and the auto industry, who could more easily recharge their old air conditioners with the stuff.

And, while we're on the subject of administration “favors,” William K. Burke won *ITT* the No. 20 position on the Project Censored list for “Risky Business,” (3/21/94), his dissection of a proposed Environmental Protection Agency reform that would in all likelihood leave Americans more exposed to the threat of pesticides.

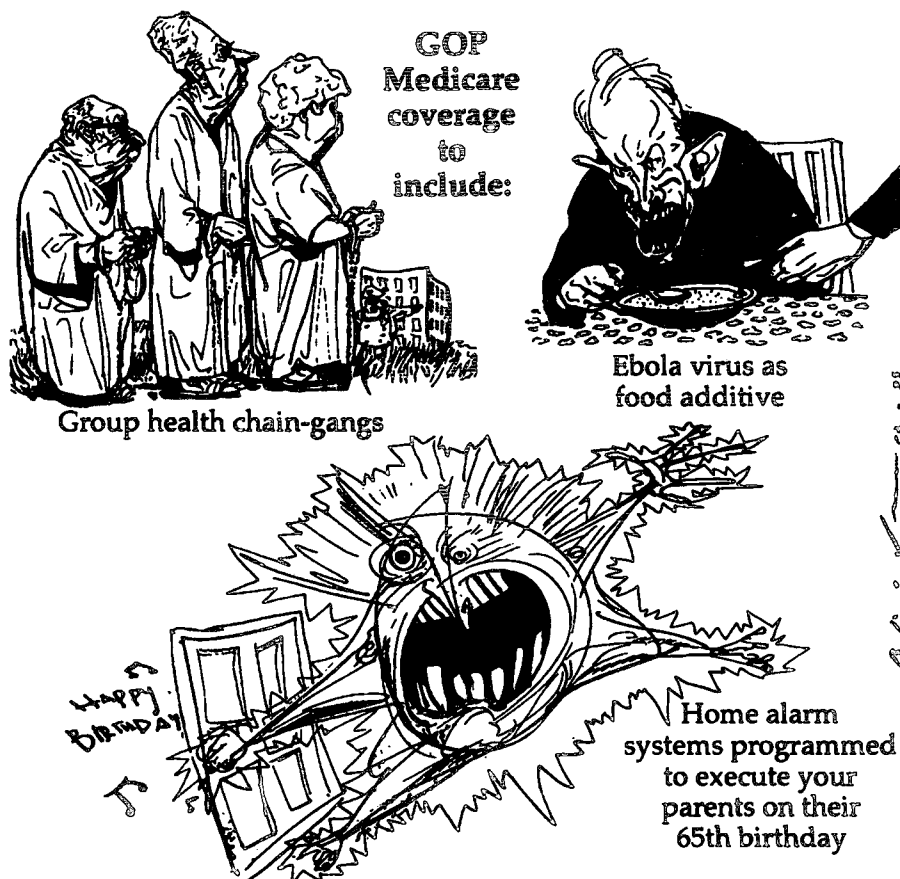
According to Project Censored, the most important story lost in the media shuffle last year was an exposé, in a small publication called *The Health Letter*, of a decade-long whitewash by the National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health, which neglected to tell some 170,000 workers that they had been exposed to hazardous materials.

Many of the stories on Project Censored's Top 10 list describe serious threats to the health and safety of ordinary Americans that have gone largely unreported. Other stories in the top 10 include a *Newsday* report on defense contractor mergers and *Earth Island Journal's* report on the Pentagon's mysterious High Frequency Active Auroral Research Project. Both reveal the kind of secretive, behind-the-scene machinations that affect our lives in profound ways—the sorts of actions, in other words, that the government would rather we know nothing about.

—David Futrelle

### Tomorrow's News Tonight

By Steve Brodner





©VINNIE LEHOTSKY

## TOXIC AVENGER

*Madelyn Hoffman tends the Garden State*

In 1979, Madelyn Hoffman was fresh out of college and an unhappy VISTA volunteer. After a slavish six-month stint as an ACORN organizer in Davenport, Iowa, she returned to her parents' home in the northern suburbs of New Jersey. "I got yelled at by ACORN for spending an afternoon by the river," she says, "and for joining the local bowling team. I was burned out on organizing."

As a graduate of Wesleyan College who loved languages, Hoffman had vague plans of attending graduate school and then becoming a United Nations interpreter. But first she wanted to make good on her commitment to VISTA, so she began tutoring children in Newark's Ironbound district, an old-world Portuguese neighborhood bordered on three sides by railroad tracks.

She enjoyed her new life in an immigrant community of seamstresses and building tradesmen. But that Thanksgiving when visiting her parents—her father, a marketing executive, and her mother, a ballerina-turned-dance teacher—Hoffman saw her new community on the news. City officials had discovered dozens of drums holding illegally stored wastes in a warehouse near her apartment. "The Newark fire director said that Ironbound was a toxic time bomb ready to explode," recalls Hoffman.

Today, Hoffman runs the Grass Roots Environmental Organization (GREGO). Over the past 15 years Hoffman has provided support to some 125 community groups on the front lines of New Jersey's toxic-waste wars.

After that Thanksgiving in 1979, Hoffman and some of her co-workers in Ironbound began to organize. They hung small cards shaped like time bombs on doorknobs to recruit members for what became the Ironbound Committee Against Toxic Wastes. The group has had several dramatic victories, like defeating plans for an incineration ship that would have docked in Newark to

ETC.

By Dave Mulcahey

## Sitting in Limbaugh

What do you call a man who berates President Clinton for opposing the Vietnam War, but secured a dubious deferment for himself; who routinely characterizes environmentalists as "wackos," yet gleans his own intelligence on environmental issues from the magazines of Lyndon Larouche; who arguably exercises more political influence than any other private citizen, yet never registered to vote until he was 35; whose favorite refrain is, "We don't make this stuff up," yet doesn't employ a single fact checker on his staff; whose rumor-mongering is influential enough to make the stock market plunge; whose loyal fans commonly direct death threats at his critics; and who earned \$15 million in 1993?

When it comes to Rush Limbaugh, you hardly know where to start. But *The Way Things Aren't* (The New Press), a detailed accounting of Limbaugh's sordid record of prevarication, pandering, defamation and general malevolence, certainly gives you a lot of material to work with. Compiled by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, the same people who bring you *EXTRA!* magazine, the book's many revelations will dispel any delusions that Limbaugh is merely a flash-in-the-pan. Now if someone would just put one of these together about Gingrich....

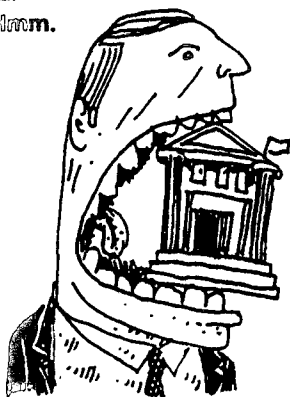


## It's a jungle out there

For those who want to see the way things really are: The New Press will soon release *The New Field Guide to the U.S. Economy* by Nancy Folbre of the Center for Popular Economics. No resource so succinctly and so graphically expresses the extent to which the toiling, non-owning American public is being hung out to dry. Chock-full of maps, pie charts and bar graphs that reveal the American economy's dirty little secrets, this book could breed a new generation of leftists if it were to be distributed widely enough.

Some highlights: the graph of average hourly earnings (lower now than they were in 1968); the pie chart of federal tax revenue sources (corporate taxes comprised 23 percent of federal income in 1960 and 10 percent in 1995); the bar graph showing the declining value of the average AFDC benefit, in 1992 dollars, over the last 25 years (\$622 in 1970, \$374 today). The careful reader will note that graphs measuring such phenomena as health care expenses, black infant mortality, business failures and household debt, college tuition as a percentage of family income, show wild oscillation and dramatic increases in the years 1980 through 1992.

Hmm.



burn hazardous wastes at sea. Ironbound members have also seen the dangers grow. In 1983, for example, they discovered that a Diamond Shamrock plant that had made Agent Orange during the Vietnam War had left behind the highest levels of dioxin contamination in the country, just 1,000 feet from Ironbound's farmers market.

"I was a suburban girl totally unaware of places like Newark," Hoffman says. "The six years that I lived there were the best education that I ever got."

Hoffman's upper-middle-class background had given her the confidence to challenge authority. "As a person who had opportunity and some degree of privilege, I could make conscious choices about how I wanted my life to shape history," she says. "Without that background, I might have felt compelled to do something in order to survive, instead of being able to feel the luxury of doing something to help."

On the other hand, that very privilege created "a large gap in understanding" between her and her community. "I needed to understand the forces at work that create a working class and keep that class in its place," she says. "I have learned a tremendous amount about people and our economic system, and it has changed my view of American society."

In 1985, Hoffman and her then-husband moved from Ironbound to Bloomfield, an area just north of Newark. They wanted a house and kids, a normal life. But that year GREO also won its first grant, so Hoffman postponed having children, and began nurturing other groups around the state. Those groups sometimes chose in-your-face acronyms like No DICE, CRAAP, and IRATE, and they challenged the state's plan to build 19 new garbage incinerators. (In the end, the state built only five.)

To help get these fledgling efforts off the ground, Hoffman handled telephone inquiries, visited kitchen organizing meetings, spoke at public hearings, and recruited pro bono lawyers. Hoffman traversed New Jersey in her Nissan Sentra, participating in toxic battles at virtually every exit on the New Jersey Turnpike.

The movement kept growing until Earth Day 1990, when Hoffman says she felt "the first crack" in her optimism. "Monsanto, Du Pont, Dow Chemical, American Cyanamid, the companies that created the pollution, were now saying, 'We're environmentalists. You're the problem. You litter in the park on Sundays. You drive to work with only one person in the car,'" Hoffman recalls. "But corporations are the ones who emit more toxic waste into the air per square mile in New Jersey than in any other state."

After Gov. Christine Todd Whitman took office in 1994, the chemical lobby unleashed an assault on the state legislature. The industry wants to roll back pollution prevention laws, repeal water pollution fines and other measures that were passed in the early '90s, after years of public pressure.

Funding has also fallen off. For the past few years, GREO hasn't been able to afford to pay a full-time salary. So Hoffman works one day a week in the office of Genesis Farm, a center for organic biodynamic gardening near the Delaware Water Gap. That work is a spiritual respite from confrontational politics. And after her marriage ended in 1987, she vowed to never become an activist-o-holic.

"I have always wanted life to be balanced. It is what has enabled me to keep going and it was one of the reasons I left ACORN. If you intend to be able to do this over the long haul, and not as a fad coming out of college, you have to be able to appreciate all aspects of life. You can't look at activism as a sacrifice, otherwise you burn out."

—Will Nixon

# T H E F I R S T S T O N E

## “WICKED BATTLE”

By Joel Bleifuss

**T**he Cold War is over. Disease Wars have begun.” So proclaims the cover of a brochure from Action for Prevention, a joint project of Greenpeace and the Women’s Environment and Development Organization that wants to prevent cancer by stopping pollution. Last October, organizers from Action for Prevention skirmished with the nation’s cancer establishment at three regional conferences—in Boston, Dayton, Ohio and Albuquerque, N.M.—that explored the links between pollution and breast cancer. A growing number of scientists believe that a group of chemicals, including some chlorinated hydrocarbons, act like an extra dose of estrogen and thereby increase a woman’s risk of contracting breast cancer.

Industries that manufacture those chemicals are keenly aware of what is at stake. How to manage the issue of the possible links between chlorine and cancer was a recurring topic at the Changing Chlorine Marketplace, a conference sponsored last month in New Orleans by *Chemical Week* and E. Bruce Harrison, a firm that specializes in public relations for corporate polluters.

So far industry executives believe they have succeeded in getting their message across. Keynote speaker Roger Hirl, the president and CEO of Occidental Petroleum, told conference participants that thanks to the public relations efforts of the Chlorine Chemistry Council (a branch of the Chemical Manufacturers Association), the mainstream media’s coverage of the chlorine issue has become “more balanced.”

PR officials for both the chlorine and nuclear industries descended on the Action for Prevention conference in Boston. As the *Boston Globe*’s Usha Lee McFarling reported, “Public relations agents ... swamped reporters at the conference with packages of information downplaying possible links between industry and cancer.”

Publicizing the dangers of those compounds is what

Paulette Olson, the organizer of the Action for Prevention conference in Dayton, was trying to do. Prior to the conference, Olson received a letter from the Chlorine Chemistry Council’s Paige McMahon, who challenged the credentials of the conference participants.

McMahon wrote Olson, saying: “Based on the conference schedule, it appears as though this event will focus almost exclusively on the alleged association between breast cancer and environmental factors at the expense of known scientific fact. ... I feel it would be beneficial for you ... to see and understand the scientific aspect of this issue, as distinct from the advocacy perspective.”

But a number of respected epidemiologists, whose research has found correlations between chemical pollutants and breast cancer, had already been invited to

the conference, and Olson refused to expand the roster of speakers. On the day of the conference, however, McMahon showed up and demanded to be heard. “I’m surprised and appalled that the leading cancer-research organizations weren’t invited,” McMahon told the press.

“Every time I think about it, I could scream,” says Olson. “We had asked [McMahon when she arrived] if she wanted to participate in the forum, but she refused. It is easier for her to grab the media and do it informally than to actually participate in the discussion with scientists. When I saw her, I let her have it. I told her that if she wanted to prostitute herself for a company, that was her decision.”

Olson, an economics professor at Dayton’s Wright State University, sees the movement to ban the industrial uses of chlorine as similar to the struggle to convince the nation that smoking tobacco causes cancer. “We are at the beginning of a battle that will go on for decades,” she says. “There are big profits to be made. That’s what drives the system.”

But the difficulties that Olson encountered were minor in comparison to the problems Robyn Seydel faced when organizing Action for Prevention’s Albuquerque conference. There, the National Cancer Institute (NCI), which downplays links between cancer and pollution, made no less than three different attempts to waylay the proceedings.

New Mexico’s two senators, Republican Pete Domenici and Democrat Jeff Bingaman, had agreed to co-sponsor the conference on the condition that both sides of the issue would be represented. So Seydel, a local health and environmental activist, arranged for experts to attend from both the NCI and the University of New Mexico Cancer Research Center, which receives NCI funding. However, after initially agreeing to send representatives, both institutions canceled their offers within 40 minutes of each other.

“Apparently, they had come to some kind of agreement



that they would not give credence to [the conference] by being on the podium, which," says Seydel, "is an old academic ploy to discredit research you don't agree with."

Then the NCI, having withdrawn from the conference, tried to prevent epidemiologist and toxicologist Devra Lee Davis from speaking at the Albuquerque conference. Davis, a senior science adviser at the Department of Health and Human Services, was the featured speaker at all three Action for Prevention conferences. Davis is the foremost proponent of the theory that estrogen mimickers in the environment are a cause of breast cancer. And she believes that restricting the use and production of certain widely used industrial materials could save many women's lives.

Two days before the conference was scheduled to begin, Seydel received a call from Maureen Wilson of the NCI ethics committee. Wilson argued that Davis, as a federal employee, could not attend the conference because it would violate the law if she appeared on the same stage with Bingaman, who was running for re-election. Seydel replied that if that was the case, she would immediately phone Bingaman and tell him not to come. "Wilson got very upset and told me I couldn't do that," Seydel recalls. "And I said I am a taxpayer, and I vote, and I can tell him that it is more important for the women of New Mexico to hear from Dr. Davis than it is to have yet one more public official on our stage." The NCI eventually dropped its objections and Davis spoke.

But the NCI was not yet finished. On the day before the conference was to begin, Albuquerque's two daily papers and the local TV stations received faxes and phone calls from the NCI that sought to discredit statistician Jay Gould. In research that is unpublished and controversial, Gould has re-examined NCI studies about breast cancer rates around nuclear facilities and found them to be faulty. The NCI's lobbying served its purpose. The press didn't send anyone to cover the conference, and none of the TV reporters who had previously said they were planning to come showed up.

"My experience showed me the lengths to which the powers that be will go," says Seydel. "If this information [on the environmental links to cancer] becomes widely known and accepted, there will have to be a major paradigm shift in how we do business in the chemical industry and the whole nuclear industry, and that strikes at the very foundations of the power structure as it is currently set up."

Despite this interference, Action for Prevention organizers will continue to spread the word about environmental carcinogens at four more regional conferences to be held this summer and fall in San Francisco, Atlanta, Raleigh, N.C., and New Orleans.

And you can bet that the chlorine industry and the cancer establishment will be lurking nearby. At last month's Changing Chlorine Marketplace symposium, Terry Yosie, a consultant for conference sponsor E. Bruce Harrison, told industry representatives to be wary of new developments. Although the Republican control of Congress bodes well for industry, he noted that the Republicans did not, after all, capture Europe in the 1994 elections. "Look out for ideas that float across the Atlantic," Yosie admonished, warning of European curbs on the use of polyvinyl chloride plastic (PVC).

Yosie is no mere flack. During the Reagan era he served as staff director of the EPA Science Advisory Board. Currently he sits on the EPA's Environmental Futures Committee. Yosie informed conference participants that his fellow prognosticators at the EPA predict that within three to five years the chlorine controversy will erupt into a "wicked battle"—a battle that will lead to mounting public concern and a pro-regulatory atmosphere in Washington. ▴

## THE ADVENTURES OF A HUGE MOUTH

by Peter Hannan



## POLITICS

## Life of the party

**I**n the conservative euphoria following the 1980 elections, one group of Republicans felt a bit like orphans at a family reunion. Although Ronald Reagan had captured the White House and the GOP had grabbed the Senate, the lower house remained in Democratic hands. Soon after the election a group of young House Republicans began holding weekly meetings dedicated to building a conservative majority. Led by Newt Gingrich, they coalesced around a vision of a free-market meritocracy dubbed the "Conservative Opportunity Society."

Fourteen years later, the second wave of the Reagan Revolution is cresting in the House of Representatives, fed by the ideas and energy of Gingrich and his conservative colleagues. Much of the Contract with America has its roots in the Conservative Opportunity Society. And House votes to roll back the New Deal and Great Society represent the triumph of a doctrinaire

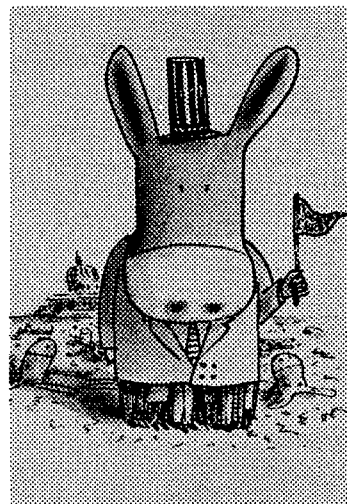
*With House Democrats in disarray, the Progressive Caucus is offering the only comprehensive response to the Republican agenda.*

By  
John Canham-Clyne  
WASHINGTON

free-market conservatism nurtured for years on the back benches of the Republican side of the House.

Nonetheless, if the GOP's electoral sweep last November represents the high tide of a well-organized conservative movement, a strong undertow has gathered beneath it thanks to the resilient House Progressive Caucus. Founded in 1992 by Reps. Bernie Sanders (I-VT), Ron Dellums (D-CA), Peter DeFazio (D-OR), Lane Evans (D-IL) and Maxine Waters (D-CA), the caucus has increased its membership in each of the past two election cycles and now numbers 40. Even though two members were unseated in November, eight new members—including three freshman Democrats—have joined.

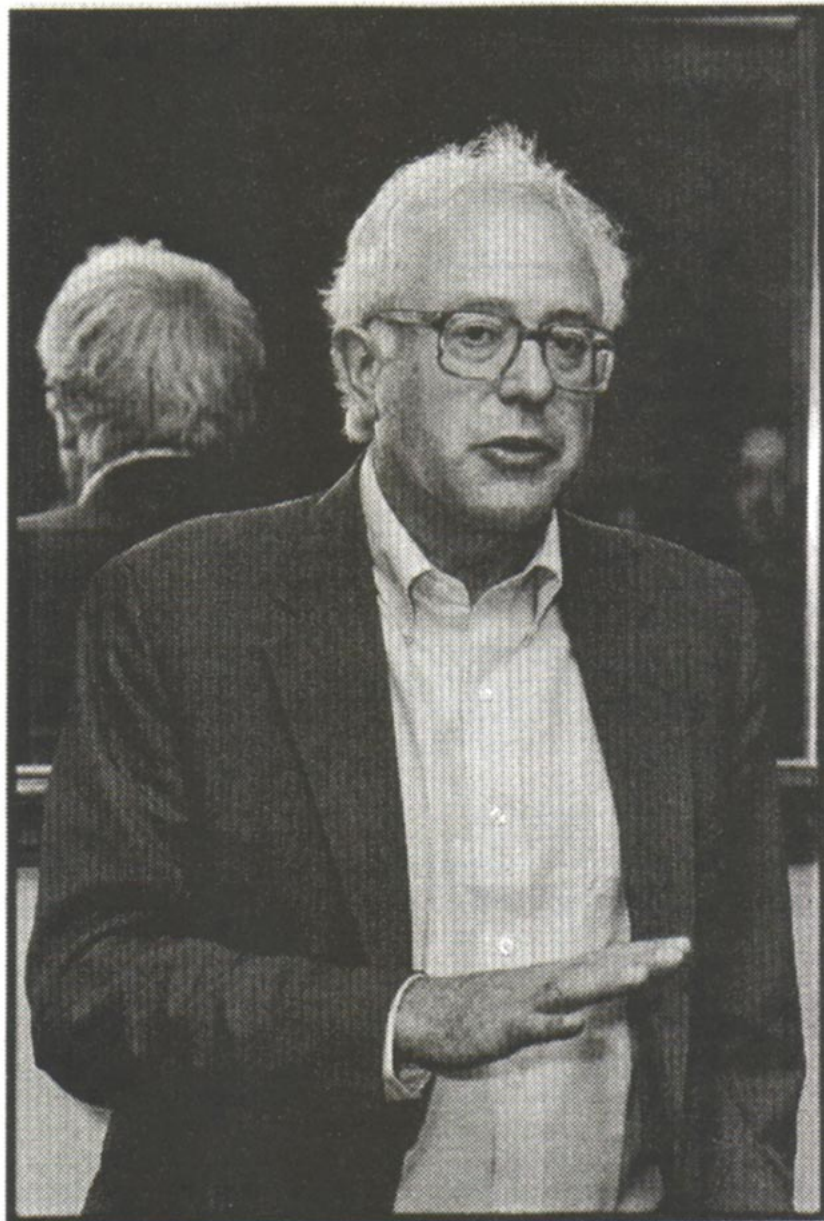
And the caucus promises to become more important as rifts in the Democratic Party become more pronounced. The party has been divided over the Contract with America—with 30 to 80 conservative House Democrats voting for most of the GOP's legislation. With the Democrats in disarray, the Progressive Caucus alone has fashioned a broad intellectual and legislative response to the Republican agenda. Their 11-point manifesto, titled "The Progressive Promise: Fairness,"



calls for a crackdown on corporate crime, the closing of dozens of tax loopholes for corporations, an increase in the minimum wage, single-payer health care, deep cuts in defense and intelligence spending, and a \$127.2 billion investment over two years in infrastructure repair and environmental cleanup. And over the next several weeks, Caucus Chairman Bernie Sanders will introduce 24 separate bills to cut subsidies to corporations, including an omnibus "Corporate Responsibility Act."

Ultimately, the success of the Progressive Caucus will depend upon its ability to highlight the nation's deepening economic divide. Gingrich and the Republicans have exploited populist discontent by denouncing the "liberal elite," railing against big government and appealing to anti-immigrant sentiment. But many progressives believe that focusing on bread-and-butter issues such as corporate welfare and health care reform offers a chance to redirect pop-





**Rep. Bernie Sanders** ulist sentiment against the business interests that really run the country. However, if last year's Clinton health bill is any indication, the White House and a majority of congressional Democrats are determined to avoid forthright confrontation with corporate power.

House progressives feel that the skittishness of party leaders is costing the Democrats important political opportunities. The health care battle was a case in point. The single-payer option, unlike Clinton's unwieldy "managed care" plan, came equipped with formidable grass-roots appeal among the elderly, the middle class and the working poor—constituencies that make up a majority of Americans. The insurance industry—one of the few private-sector institutions that rivals the government in unpopularity—would have made a ready enemy for soundbite politics. Instead,

Clinton's compromises soured the political atmosphere and left the rhetorical initiative in the hands of the Health Insurance Association of America and its notorious "Harry and Louise" ads.

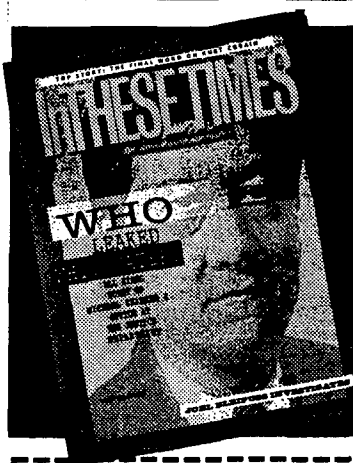
Despite the powerful political messages at their disposal, the Progressive Caucus lacks institutions that can build mass support for their programs. The left's grass-roots constituencies are badly fragmented, and no liberal group can match the Republican Party's ability to coordinate popular dissatisfaction. After decades of organizing, the right has built up a network of well-funded media outlets and think tanks that can frame political debate on a wide variety of issues. The left also suffers from a glaring tactical liability that the right hasn't had to contend with: progressives offer an anti-corporate message that finds no natural home in the popular press.

Even among Democrats, the progressives' radical image has estranged them from the party's mainstream leadership. As much as any single member, current Caucus Chairman Bernie Sanders has put his stamp on the Progressive Promise legislation. And Sanders' embrace of the dreaded "socialist" label—especially in his early years—and his use of frank class rhetoric make many Democrats uncomfortable. One staffer for a conservative Rust Belt Democrat admits that "there's been a reluctance on the part of some of the old-line anti-communist liberals to deal with Sanders."

But Sanders suggests that the key to the success of progressive candidates—and, implicitly, the revival of the Democratic Party—is recognizing that "all of the issues in the Progressive Promise are mainstream.

The majority of Americans support decent wages, national health care, limiting corporate welfare and protecting the environment. The fact of the matter is that the Republicans and the corporate media are out of touch with the American people. When I go home to Vermont, unfunded mandates aren't exactly on everyone's lips."

What should be on people's lips, Sanders says, is the skewed distribution of wealth in the United States. "If you ask Americans what they think about the fact that the CEOs of the Fortune 500 make 150 times the wages of the average worker, they'll say it's not fair. The Republicans wage class warfare—and criticize the Democrats for talking about [it]. Someone has to start talking about the fact that 1 percent of Americans own 40 percent of the wealth. If there is a future for the left it has to be to focus on basic class issues and corporate America."



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In the past, Democratic leaders have proven all but allergic to class-based political rhetoric. Under House Speaker Tom Foley, there was little open debate among congressional Democrats, and almost no room for initiatives from the left that might challenge the flow of corporate cash into Democratic campaign coffers.

Now, however, House Democrats regularly meet to hash out legislative ideas, and progressives are able to confront their conservative colleagues directly. The credit for the Democratic perestroika is universally given to House Minority Whip David Bonior of Michigan, who, as the second-ranking House Democrat, is by far the most powerful member of the Progressive Caucus.

Intense, quiet, with a carefully trimmed beard, Bonior is at first glance an unlikely exponent of progressive causes. A former Catholic seminarian, he personally opposes abortion. Throughout the '80s, when many congressional Democrats were winning re-election with more than 70 percent of the vote, support for Bonior among the increasingly conservative white ethnics in his suburban Detroit district often slipped into the 50s.

In an interview in the whip's office on the third floor of the Capitol, Bonior cautiously discusses his personal politics, and hesitates to criticize more conservative Democrats. Yet Bonior boldly opposed the White House when President Clinton made NAFTA his top legislative priority early in 1993. It was an extraordinary moment, highlighting the profound tensions within the party. Still, Bonior refuses to criticize the White House on the record. "They know what I think, and we have to work together." Ultimately, Bonior's concern for the future of the Democratic Party seems to temper his commitment to the progressive agenda.

The same could be said for Rep. Barney Frank (D-MA), perhaps the best-known national figure in the Progressive Caucus. Since the November Republican victory, Frank has become the soundbite spokesman for the opposition, a role that makes some fellow progressives a little uneasy. A staffer for one Progressive Caucus member, speaking on condition of anonymity, says anxiously that Frank "is one of our least active members. His politics are fine, but he doesn't attend meetings. Many of our members are more progressives first and Democrats second, and Barney's clearly a Democrat first."

It's a description that Frank embraces. He has argued for years that the left's assertion that there's little difference between Republicans and Democrats is a dangerous and self-destructive illusion. With the GOP victory, says Frank, single-issue left activists have "lost the luxury of irrelevance. As long as we were in the majority, they could spend most of their time expressing dissatisfaction with our lack of perfection. Now they're going to have to be much more active because they realize that the other bastards are a lot worse than us."

In an animated interview just off the House floor, Frank ticks off the list of issues at the heart of the Progressive Promise—wages, fair trade, environmental protection—and



insists that the Democrats are beginning to form a consensus around the need to reactivate the traditional New Deal base. But pressed on the subject, Frank betrays the contradictory impulses progressives struggle with when party loyalties are invoked. One moment he passionately vows that the Democrats will let no further trade deals pass without "stiff labor rights, environmental, health and safety provisions"; the next moment he sheepishly defends Clinton's support for NAFTA. "I think the administration made a mistake," he says, "but there's a difference between starting from scratch and turning the table over when there's a treaty on the table." Frank notes that NAFTA had already been negotiated by President Bush. "I would have turned the table over and renegotiated NAFTA, but I can see why [Clinton] didn't."

Similarly, Frank inspires little confidence when heralding Democratic unity on the issue of public investments. "We have fairly good consensus on most economic issues," he says, pausing to add, "except defense." Asked if that isn't a crucial reservation, since military spending is the only likely source for money for public investments, Frank nods gravely and says, "That's where we're vulnerable." Bonior gives a similarly clipped answer when asked about the divisions within the Democratic Party on defense spending: "Right, we have a problem."

Bonior and Frank, to be sure, are not the first to note the problem. Promoting a rational defense policy has been a longstanding concern of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), which consistently criticized the military buildup of the Reagan years. During the '80s, the CBC formed the institutional base of the Democratic Party's left wing, so it should come as no surprise that more than a third of the Progressive Caucus' current members are African-Americans. In fact, CBC members Ron Dellums, Major Owens and Maxine Waters comprise half of the Progressive Caucus Executive Committee.

The Progressive Caucus' first major legislative effort was to join in coalition with the CBC to support the black caucus' 1992 alternative budget. First drafted in 1981, the CBC



Rep. Cynthia McKinney

annual budgets have offered an alternative vision of spending priorities, emphasizing reduced military expenditures, progressive taxation, infrastructure investment and increased attention to education, health and social welfare. The CBC's proposed fiscal year 1993 budget, for example, called for a 50 percent reduction in military spending over four years. Had it been adopted, it would have resulted in greater deficit reduction than anything proposed by the mainstream of either party.

Since its inception, the Progressive Caucus has relied on senior CBC members such as Dellums for leadership. But much of the caucus' vitality now comes from newly arrived black and Hispanic members who were elected after redistricting in 1992 increased the number of minority representatives in Congress. These younger members, many with activist backgrounds, have eagerly adopted the guerrilla tactics perfected by Gingrich's conservatives in the '80s—for example, delivering fiery speeches to an empty House chamber that nevertheless reach a nationwide C-SPAN audience.

In January, one of those young members, Cynthia McKinney (D-GA), became a symbol of progressive resistance to the GOP when House Republicans moved to strike her scathing criticism of Gingrich's book deal from the *Congressional Record*. Representing a largely poor, rural district, McKinney well understands the fault lines in American society. In Georgia, she says, "we're still fighting the battle for an equal education; we're still fighting the battle for enforcement of the Voting Rights Act."

For the left to succeed, says McKinney, it must grapple with the widespread alienation of the American public from the political system. Among her own constituents, that alienation runs centuries deep and breeds a distrust of both parties. To overcome this hostility, progressives must provide "very real proof" that the system can work for them. "How is a parent going to send her kid to school," McKinney asks, "when she knows that the kid is going to receive an inadequate education and wind up with no skills, [competing] for jobs that aren't there?"

In the face of such widespread disillusionment, progressives are often willing to try any idea that will make government's positive influence palpable to their con-

stituents. Although many on the left deride enterprise zones as a largely symbolic Republican gesture, McKinney is careful to praise the Clinton White House for helping designate four counties in her district as rural enterprise zones. "We have people in our district without any money, eking out a Third World existence, who had no reason to put their faith in any representative of any government suddenly talking about how they can start a business. The Clinton administration has allowed us to do that."

**D**espite their occasional plaudits for Clinton, the progressives express frustration with the president's cautious approach to politics. Instead of fashioning a message that could compel disaffected voters to return to the polls, the White House continues to follow the lead of the moderate Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), which holds that political success lies in appealing to the shrinking percentage of the electorate that still votes. Since that faction is disproportionately wealthy and conservative, the DLC strategy is to steal the Republican thunder on a number of issues, especially race. Hence much of the recent discussion, among Democrats as well as Republicans, of the purported iniquities of affirmative action.

The race issue hits especially close to home for McKinney. On April 16, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments on the constitutionality of her district as well as that of Progressive Caucus member Cleo Fields. McKinney calls the redistricting battle and the wider backlash against affirmative action symptoms of growing bad faith in the politics of race. "Everything I am is a result of affirmative action," she says. "The Voting Rights Act is political affirmative action, but affirmative action nonetheless. It's based on a long history of past discrimination, and it wasn't a black legislature that produced this discriminatory past."

McKinney wasn't the only progressive beneficiary of the recent redistricting. New York lost three House seats in 1992, including the district of moderate Brooklyn Democrat Stephen Solarz. Despite a long résumé and a \$3.2 million war chest, Solarz failed in his bid to represent a new district when he was out-organized by Nydia Velazquez, a longtime Puerto Rican activist with solid progressive credentials.

Velazquez tempers some of her progressive views with calls for welfare reform and "individual responsibility" that can sound deceptively conservative. But, in the recent debates over welfare, Velazquez played a key role in pushing Democrats to offer serious investments in job training and employment assistance rather than simply throwing women off the welfare rolls. Largely due to her efforts, the welfare block grant bill—which would abolish the status of welfare as a federal entitlement—was the only piece of the GOP contract to pass with virtually no Democratic support.

Velazquez insists that the Republicans now control Congress because they "spent the last 10 years pushing emotional buttons. They were successful because we failed to develop a really progressive agenda. People are working more

and more every year and earning less, and we ran out of ideas."

Like most caucus members, Velazquez believes that the unifying issues for the left are economic, and that if the Democrats want to be the majority party in the long run, they must frame a powerful message of economic justice. But she cautions that for the foreseeable future, "I don't have any illusions in thinking that our agenda will become the center of the Democratic Party. It will be a point of debate."

It is a sad commentary on the left's current condition that politicians such as Velazquez and McKinney count having progressive ideas debated among the Democrats as a victory. Indeed, it's a sign of the weakness both of the left and of the Democratic Party itself. Having bought into the Cold War and free markets, the Democrats are now ill-equipped to articulate a progressive, pro-labor foreign policy. And the left is still struggling to find electoral alternatives to the Democrats. That's why Bernie Sanders argues that, despite the rapid growth of the Progressive Caucus, "we have to distinguish between what we can accomplish within [Congress], which is not very much, and outside [Congress], which may be a little more."

Sanders has been working to build an independent political organization in Vermont, but in the rest of the country institutions that might push the Democratic Party further left—or replace it altogether—are still in their infancy. Environmental groups, labor unions and civil rights organizations still fit loosely within the Democratic coalition, but their alliance is far more tentative than the Republican union between economic conservatives, corporate America and the Christian right. The Republican coalition suffers from some internal divisions—chiefly on "values" issues such as reproductive choice—but Republicans remain united on basic pocketbook issues.

In contrast, the Democrats' incoherent response to the GOP's recent balanced budget proposals underscores the crippling divisions within the Democratic camp. Each wing of the party produced a proposal with radically different priorities. The black caucus, with Progressive Caucus support, issued a balanced budget proposal with deep cuts in defense and increases in spending for education and public works. A group of conservative Democrats, led by Rep. Charles Stenholm (D-TX), also put forward a balanced budget proposal, but with priorities only slightly different than those of the Republicans. Meanwhile, President Clinton urged House Democratic leaders not to choose either proposal—effectively leaving the party adrift.

Though the Progressive Caucus may still be institutionally weak, the force of its ideas could provide important new possibilities for the party's revival. As bad as the Gingrich era may seem, the obstacles currently facing progressives in Congress resemble those that the Conservative Opportunity Society confronted—and overcame—in the Democratic-controlled Congress of the '80s. ◀



# Chirac wave

**A**

*In an  
unpredictable  
French  
election, the  
center-right  
holds.*

By **Diana Johnstone**  
PARIS

fter 14 years under Socialist François Mitterand, the French Republic has elected a new president, Jacques Chirac, who is promising some of the "changes" promised earlier by the Socialists: jobs, solidarity, social justice. French citizens can be pardoned their skepticism.

Mitterand could leave office with the personal satisfaction of having lasted longer than his old rival Charles de Gaulle. His political achievements reflect his mastery of ambiguity. Initial social reforms turned into textbook demonstrations that such reforms were no longer possible in a world of mobile investment capital, and the early nationalizations actually facilitated

subsequent privatization by whipping money-losing enterprises into shape to be sold off to private shareholders.

The fact that the government was Socialist probably helped persuade the losing classes to hold still while they downed the medicine administered to strengthen the competitive position of the country's big business in the world market. France is today the world's fourth-largest industrial power, a prosperous and comfortable country for society's winners.

But under Socialist rule the gap between capital and labor has widened dramatically. Unemployment is at a record 3 million (more than 12 percent), and exasperation with politicians is mounting.

Only a few months ago, polls and pundits were confidently writing off Chirac as a pitiful has-been and announcing that the next president was almost sure to be the suave and soporific Prime Minister Edouard Balladur. With the impeccable tailoring and courtesy of a successful undertaker, Balladur's air of elegant resignation pleased the smart-money crowd. As it turned out, the Balladur/Chirac rivalry transformed the 1995 presidential election into France's best political show in years.

Leader of the conservative neo-Gaullist Rally for the Republic (RPR) and mayor of Paris, Jacques Chirac was prime minister in the first RPR-led government (1986-88) during the Mitterand presidency. As Chirac's finance minister, Balladur gave a hint of his character by refusing to vacate his elegant old Louvre offices when his ministry moved to a new building.

As opportunists rallied to Balladur, who surged ahead in early opinion polls, the public began to savor the entertaining drama of friendship and betrayal within the RPR: simple, good-hearted Jacques Chirac, stabbed in the back by his old friend. The two smartest politicians of the rising conservative generation stuck with Chirac, and as a result have emerged as strong figures—and potential rivals. One is Alain Juppé, a skilled, pragmatic technocrat who previously served as foreign minister—and is expected to be named prime minister under Chirac. The other is National Assembly President Phillipe Séguin—widely regarded as perhaps the boldest thinker on the French political scene today—who is given main credit for the resolutely "social" tone of the Chirac campaign. Séguin's views can be characterized as "social-republicanism," based on the principle that preservation of the republic requires full rights of citizenship for all. In the campaign against Balladur, Chirac and Séguin insisted that social exclusion undermines citizenship, and therefore the Republic.

The social theme brought out Balladur's main handicap: his image as a sheltered scion of wealth, totally unaware of

how ordinary people live—in sharp contrast to the earthier, friendlier Chirac. As the campaign warmed up, the two RPR candidates were seen to embody a classic split within the French right—between finance capital, passively accumulating dividends (Balladur), and the Bonapartist or Gaullist tradition, reconciling social classes in the pursuit of the common welfare (Chirac).

Meanwhile, on the other end of the political spectrum, the Socialist Party's long dependence on François Mitterand left it internally divided between rival factions, drained of self-confidence and devoid of ideas. The party suffered overwhelming defeat in the 1993 parliamentary elections. Even so, last autumn the Socialists glimpsed salvation in the possible candidacy of yet another providential leader, European Union (EU) Commission President Jacques Delors.

But shortly before Christmas, Delors bowed out, arguing that even if elected, there was no real majority in France in favor of carrying out the policies he deemed necessary. His withdrawal spared the EU, the cause to which he had devoted the past decade, from being pulled into the center of a divisive presidential election campaign.

Without Delors, the Socialist Party looked like a sinking ship. Early in January, the party's former first secretary, Lionel Jospin, announced he was ready to "fill the vacuum." Jospin, never a media star, had vanished from public life after the party's 1993 electoral debacle. The Socialists, he said, were to blame for their defeat because the party failed to live up to its ideals. Early last February, more than 65 percent of Socialist Party members chose Jospin as their party's candidate. It was a return to innocence. The job of earnest and honest Jospin was to lose honorably, save the Socialist Party from total humiliation and start the work of rebuilding the left.

So it was quite a surprise when Jospin came in first in the April 23 first round, with 23.3 percent of the vote, ahead of Chirac, who with 20.8 percent nosed out Balladur (18.6 percent) to qualify for the runoff. Hot on their heels was the menacing National Front leader, Jean-Marie Le Pen, who exceeded his previous tallies with more than 15 percent.

The rest of the April 23 vote, divided between five official candidates, was mostly interpreted as protest. The 8.6 percent for Communist candidate Robert Hue was partly protest and partly fidelity, but the record 5.3 percent for veteran Trotskyist militant Arlette Laguiller clearly reflected voter disenchantment. She dismissed all the candidates as bourgeois lackeys and summoned the working class to rise up in a wave of strikes when the balloting was done.

The 4.7 percent who voted for ultraconservative Philippe

de Villiers were protesting mainly against the EU; he suffered from being deprived of his main target by Delors' withdrawal. Green candidate Dominique Voynet ran a "rainbow" campaign that situated the Green party clearly on the left but failed to convey a coherent vision of ecological sustainability and got only 3.3 percent of the vote.

Finally, an obscure Lyndon Larouche follower named Jacques Cheminade found 500 gullible small-town mayors to sign his application to get on the ballot. This gave him access to the free equal television time provided by the present election system, but garnered him scarcely any votes.

Much was said about the shift to the right. But everything is relative, and it is only fair to point out that all the leading candidates, including Chirac, are, by most measures, to the left of Bill Clinton, except for Le Pen, who could easily pass as a Southern senator if he were in the United States.

The second round was a close contest between two likable underdogs, Jospin and Chirac. Their two-hour TV debate was so polite and technical that most viewers tuned out. The final result left both men happy. Chirac, with 52.6 percent, had won by a safe margin. Jospin, with 47.4 percent, had done far better than anyone, including himself, had expected. He had restored hope to the Socialist Party in a mere three months with a sober campaign based on a modest but credible program—without Mitterand.

Jospin is in a strong position to lead the liberal left, in the form of a renovated Socialist or broadened "Democratic" party.

This liberal left is likely to be modestly social democratic, more green than in the past, and resolutely pro-European.

The happy end to the election was only the beginning of a period of unknown troubles. The record 20 percent abstention rate showed considerable discontent with both candidates. Bitter disillusion with Mitterand's Socialist reign was expressed not only in the votes for Arlette Laguiller but also, more ominously, in the big votes for Le Pen in working-class districts, some of which went to Jospin in the second round. Le Pen himself called for abstention, but directed most of his venom against Chirac throughout the campaign. The new president thus owes nothing to the National Front, which is waiting in the wings to profit from mounting discontent when he fails to keep his campaign promise to reduce unemployment. And such failure seems more than likely.

President Chirac is likely to see his "honeymoon" plagued by strikes for higher wages, protests against social exclusion and homelessness, speculative attacks on the franc, and sharp conflicts between pressure for privatization and attachment to public services. Chirac's RPR, with its traditional links to intensive agriculture, the aviation industry and above all to the French nuclear establishment, is

*Lionel Jospin  
restored hope to  
the French  
Socialist Party  
in a mere three  
months with  
a modest  
but credible  
campaign.*



scarcely apt to come up with the necessary "qualitative changes" promised by Chirac during the campaign.

The fundamental problem is the disempowerment of government by the "market," which is to say the anonymous financial markets sloshing untold billions of dollars of investment funds around the planet. Almost all French politicians would sincerely like to do something to salvage "liberté, égalité, fraternité," that is, social solidarity, to maintain the quality of life in their country. But how can they?

Mainstream European left politicians—Socialist, Labor and left Christian Democratic—have placed their hopes on Europe, that is, on the possibility that the power to direct economic policy, lost at the national level, may be revived by new political mechanisms at the European Union level. But in reality, this has not happened.

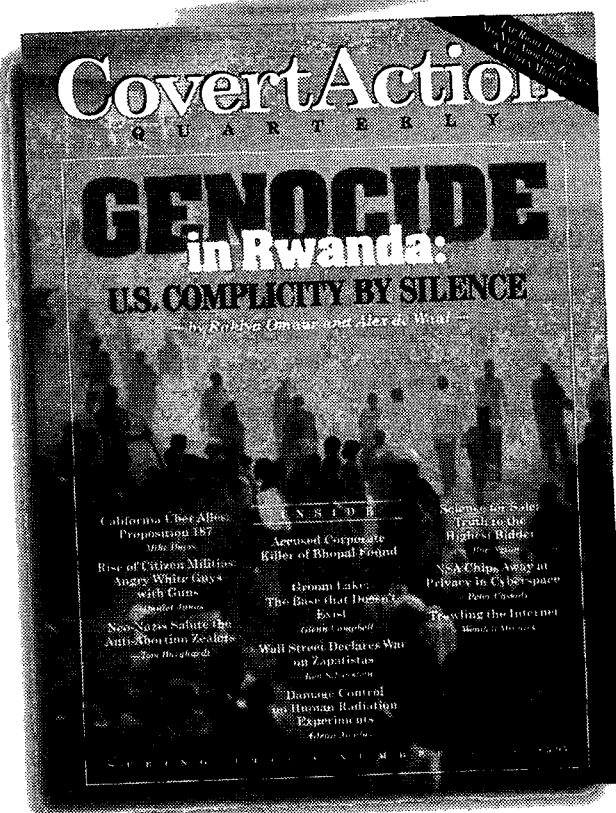
If Chirac managed to convince most voters of his good intentions, few are really convinced that he can put them into effective practice. There is no sign that he has any answer to the problems posed by the disempowerment of politics itself by the all-powerful world market. Chirac proposes paying employers a bonus for hiring long-term unemployed. This does not answer the major fiscal questions posed by the growth of mass unemployment. The Chirac campaign has encouraged the current wave of strikes by endorsing wage increases in companies whose profits have risen. This reflects concerns within the business community itself to stop sacrificing the purchasing power of the home market for the sake of advantages in the world market.

It is inevitable that the supremacy of the market over politics should run into opposition in France, with its long tradition of an activist state. This opposition is likely to find its clearest expression in the "social republicanism" of Philippe Séguin. Séguin rose to national prominence by his well thought-out opposition to the Maastricht Treaty in the 1992 referendum. His strategy today would be to accept EU commitments, but to forge a strong alliance with forces in other EU countries, notably in Germany, also concerned about preserving social solidarity. From his perch as president of the National Assembly, Séguin remains the leading candidate for presidential éminence grise.

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# Chicago defender

**Vernon Jarrett  
has devoted a  
long career to  
challenging the  
journalistic  
mainstream.**

**By Salim Muwakkil**  
CHICAGO

**F**ollowing the death of his good friend Harold Washington in 1987, Vernon Jarrett commandeered the microphone at a memorial rally for Chicago's first black mayor and launched into an emotional speech that astonished the audience.

Although he was then a *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist and member of the paper's editorial board, Jarrett passionately urged those assembled to take action against the late mayor's "scheming" opponents. Visibly weeping and seething with anger, his comments so excited the volatile crowd that some accused Jarrett of instigating violence.

Many of his white (and some black) colleagues severely criticized his actions as overstepping the bounds of professional propriety. But Jarrett maintains

that his actions were perfectly reasonable. "I knew that Harold's enemies were scheming to make a political deal with some 'Uncle Tom' black folks and I wanted the people to know what was happening," he says now, still clearly caught up in the passion of the moment. "I was loud and angry, because I was mad as hell. They were trying to bury Harold's programs even before he was in the ground."

Jarrett's impassioned rejoinder to his critics certainly does nothing to blunt the objection that his political passions are incongruent with journalistic objectivity. It's just that Jarrett rejects the premise of that objection. In fact, he insists that pushing the politics of fairness is journalism's highest responsibility. Jarrett may have been out on a limb with his editors, but his beliefs are firmly rooted in the tradition from which he emerged.

Unlike the more stolid world of mainstream journalism, black journalism was born in a spirit of protest. The nation's first black-owned newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, was published by Samuel Cornish and John Russwurm in 1827 with the express purpose

of countering pro-slavery editorials in a number of New York City newspapers. That vigorous tradition of protest has been a touchstone for many black organizers who consider journalism a natural extension of their activism. And many of black America's most pivotal figures—from Frederick Douglass to W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey—have been journalists.

Jarrett is of that lineage. And although his venue for the last 25 years has been the mainstream media, he seldom has wavered from the principles of that activist tradition. "I became a journalist to do something," he says. "I wanted to help make some changes in my people's condition, not just to sit around and analyze. I intended to get right into the thick of things, to fight like hell."

That may well be the most apt description of Jarrett's journalistic career, which now is in a state of transition. He retired last July from the *Chicago Sun-Times* after 11 years of writing three columns a week. Before that he put in 13 years as a columnist at the rival *Chicago Tribune*. Along the way he has racked up an impressive array of mainstream awards and plaudits, including five Pulitzer Prize nominations.

But more than that, Jarrett has founded a number of institutions that bear eloquent witness to his passionate engagement with the politics of the black community. In 1973, he helped create the National Association of Black Journalists, an organization that has since become a power in the industry, helping African-American journalists advance their careers while keeping them grounded in the political concerns of the black community. Jarrett, in association

with officials at the NAACP, also created the Afro-Academic, Cultural, Technological and Scientific Olympic program, which has inspired academic achievement among black youths and generated hundreds of thousands of dollars in scholarships.

Last year, he also initiated the Vernon Jarrett Oratorical Society for Kids as a joint effort with Chicago's DuSable Museum of African-American History and local churches to help introduce black children to what he calls the lost art of oratory. In 1993, Jarrett was selected as a professional scholar at the Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University, and he appeared as a narrator in the widely praised BBC production of "The Promised Land," based on Nicholas Lemann's book chronicling the northward migration of African-Americans after World War II. He's also been host and producer of "Vernon Jarrett: Face to Face," which has been airing on Chicago's ABC TV affiliate for the last 25 years. Finally, he produces "Jarrett Journal," a thrice-weekly radio commentary broadcast on the black-owned radio station WVON-AM.

That's a pretty busy schedule for all but the most energetic career climber, let alone for a man in his early 70s (Jarrett will admit only to "pushing 70"). But Jarrett shows no signs of slowing down. In fact, he still has a hard time saying no or turning over his battle station to some younger Turk.

Born and raised in Paris, Tenn., a "little country town overflowing with extraordinary people," Jarrett came to Chicago in 1946 and began his journalism career at the *Chicago Defender*. During much of his time at the legendary Chicago publication, he covered the racial violence that greeted black GIs upon their return from service in World War II. "I'd seen so many cases where white people's virulent hatred of blacks completely blinded them to the sacrifice black soldiers had made for their own freedom. It was eye-opening."

It opened his eyes so widely that after leaving the *Defender* he decided to become more directly involved in the push and pull of political activism. Among his more interesting projects was a news analysis radio program pairing him with the erudite performer-artist Oscar Brown Jr. But after mounting uncounted assaults on the racist status quo from outside the system, Jarrett decided to shift venues.

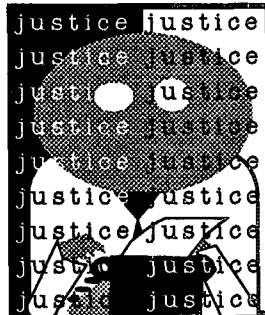
He signed on at the *Chicago Tribune* in 1970 as one of the very few black columnists writing regularly for a mainstream paper. "I thought I would get a chance to speak to a larger audience about issues that I thought were plain and simple: justice versus injustice," he says. His columns had a leftish, pro-labor tilt that sometimes provoked protests from rabid anti-communists. But he also entertained some black nationalist notions that made some leftists wary. He moved to the *Sun-Times* in 1983. His new executive duties on the paper's editorial board did little to tone down his writing,

and he settled in as a principled voice of dissent, unafraid to assert a black perspective.

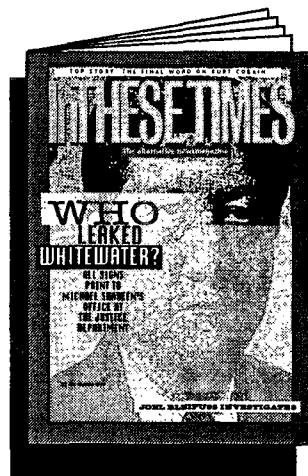
Jarrett was also noted for his honest criticism of black leadership. Accused often of "airing our dirty linen in public," he provided the stock response, "clean linen is better than dirty linen." During the Rev. Jesse Jackson's early PUSH days, Jarrett was one of the good reverend's earliest and most vociferous critics. He has since come to regard Jackson in a more positive light, but Jarrett is still careful about who gets his favor.

These days, he's particularly critical of what he thinks is the trendy praise for "reformed" street gang members. And as usual, his opposition is more than print-deep; he's thrown himself into the middle of another battle because of it: Jarrett is running for election as vice president of the South Side branch of the city's NAACP, attempting to defeat another candidate who, he argues, is controlled by the city's largest street gangs.

Jarrett sees the growing power of gangs as a pathology afflicting an urbanized black community that has lost touch with its roots. "We came to the cities and lost the glue that enabled so many of our grandparents to not just persevere, but to excel." He says he will spend the rest of his life reminding African-Americans of what was lost—and why it needs to be reclaimed. ◀



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**E N V I R O N M E N T**

# Atomic haste

*Plans to store nuclear waste in Nevada's Yucca Mountain may be a dangerous quick-fix for a very long-term problem.*

By Shea Dean  
LAS VEGAS, NEV.

**I**n the vast expanse of the southwestern Nevada desert, amid blooming Yucca plants and Joshua trees, the nation's nuclear-waste crisis is quietly reaching critical mass. For nearly 12 years, the U.S. government has been laying the groundwork for an enormous high-level radioactive waste dump inside Yucca Mountain, a barren, flat-topped ridge 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas. It marks the first attempt to bury the most lethal of all atomic leftovers, the spent fuel rods from nuclear reactors. For all practical purposes, the dump would be permanent. And it would remain deadly long after plutonium's half-life of 24,000 years has elapsed.

Nevadans are overwhelmingly hostile to the plan. Democratic Gov. Bob Miller and the state's entire congressional delegation oppose it. And at various stages in the dump's development numerous scientists have denounced the project on technical grounds. In

March, a physicist from Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico offered the most alarming theory yet, suggesting that the dump, once completed, might simply heat up and spontaneously explode.

But the nation's nuclear power industry and the U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) insist that some kind of long-term centralized storage system must be completed—and soon. For nearly 40 years irradiated fuel rods have been accumulating in underground pools at reactors; today nearly two-thirds of those pools are filled to more than twice their intended capacity. A growing number of nuclear utilities are starting to store some spent fuel in temporary above-ground storage containers called dry casks, but safety problems resulting from cost-cutting and a lack of environmental regulation have already prompted a slew of lawsuits from local activists.

Now, as part of the deregulatory fervor sweeping Congress, nuclear utilities might finally have the atomic waste problem taken out of their hands—and foisted into Nevada's. Two bills—one authored by Sen. Bennett Johnston (D-LA), one by Rep. Fred Upton (R-MI), and both derided by environmentalists as politically expedient quick fixes—propose opening a centralized above-ground interim-storage facility at Yucca Mountain in the near future. An interim facility in Nevada was expressly forbidden by 1987 amendments to the Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1982. Then, as now, it was believed that 15,000 shipments of waste left “temporarily” at the foot of Yucca Mountain would make a permanent dump there a fait accompli—decades before its myriad political and scientific problems are resolved.

With votes on the bills expected this summer, the state of Nevada is preparing itself for what might be the largest court battle yet over nuclear policy—the outcome of which will likely determine the long-term prospects of the ailing nuclear power industry and reveal whether the government can fairly and democratically find a solution to the problems posed by the industry's deadly wastes.

**O**n a hot, cloudless morning in March, environmentalist Judy Treichel and DOE scientist Bruce Crowe drive the 100 miles from Las Vegas to Yucca Mountain, arguing, albeit politely, the entire time. Crowe, a self-proclaimed liberal and environmentalist, has been studying the geology of Yucca Mountain for the DOE since 1979. Although he knows that the dump is contentious politically, “as a scientist,” he says, he thinks it can work.

Treichel, the executive director of the Nevada Nuclear Waste Task Force, an independent organization that receives some money from the state, vehemently disagrees. A conscientious activist-turned-expert, she gives lectures about the hazards of the dump and rails against the politics

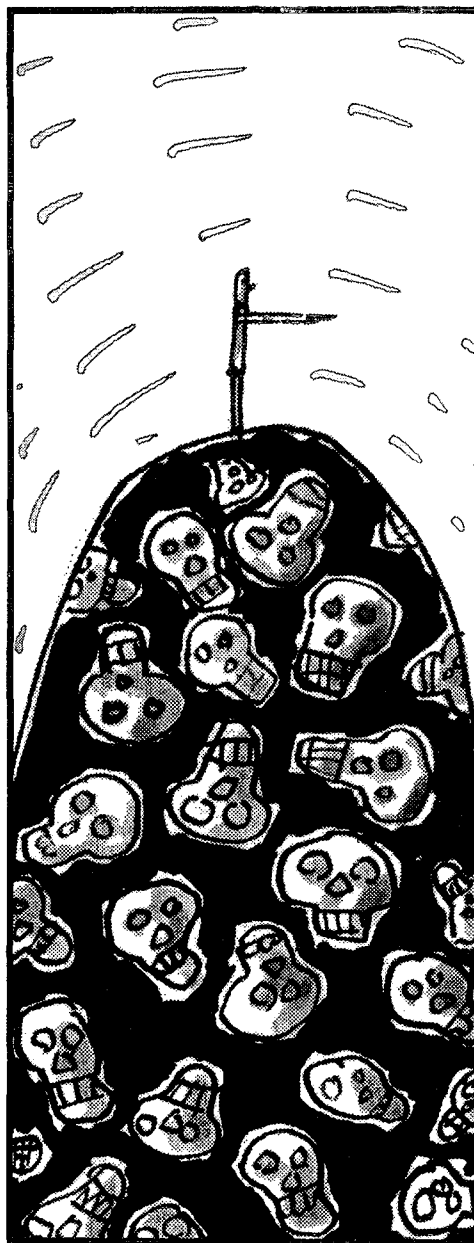
that have steamrolled the project's opponents. "We're doing what we think is responsible by being adversarial," she says of her group.

During the drive to Yucca Mountain, relics of the country's 50-year nuclear history crop up everywhere. First we first pass the vast Nevada Test Site. Once the pride of patriotic Nevadans, the atomic testing ground is now lethally contaminated in many areas, and its legacy lives on in the "down-winders" who continue to suffer from cancer and other radiation side effects.

Fifty miles down the road we turn off onto the actual dump site, which is itself a virtual museum of failed nuclear programs. After clearing a security checkpoint, we drive past a long row of colossal cement tubes constructed during Ronald Reagan's abortive effort to shuttle MX missiles on an underground rail system. A little further on is a large boarded-up building that was used to store radioactive materials during the Kennedy era's nuclear rocket program. That project was also nixed. But the Yucca Mountain dump, unlike its Cold War predecessors, could not be abandoned and forgotten were it to fail. Already, a planned 115-mile-long labyrinth is being carved inside the high, snaking ridge. When construction is completed—in 2023, according to current estimates—plans call for the tunnels to be filled with 70,000 metric tons of nuclear waste. That would represent most, but not all, of the high-level waste expected to be generated by the nation's atomic weapons facilities and commercial power plants by that time. By then, if waste production continues at its current rate, a second dump will be needed.

Crowe explains that after a few hundred years, the tunnels will undoubtedly collapse, making the containers essentially irretrievable. But theoretically, he says, because the water table at Yucca Mountain is so low—a third of a mile below the level of the proposed storage tunnels—and because the climate is one of the driest in the United States, the waste should stay safe and dry for its entire hazardous lifetime.

However, a number of troubling scenarios have been downplayed or ignored. "There's a whole lot you can do in the lab, in the sanctity of the ivory towers," says Treichel,



"but you can look back even a hundred years and you couldn't have talked about the greenhouse effect, you couldn't have talked about ozone holes." You couldn't have talked about the 5.6-magnitude earthquake that rocked Yucca Mountain in 1992, either, or about the underground nuclear detonations that permanently fractured the nearby Rainier Mesa and may also have cracked parts of the proposed dump site.

From the 1,200-foot summit of Yucca Mountain, one can spot other potential problems with the site. First, Crowe gestures toward Trench No. 8, which was dug in 1990 by the Energy Department to investigate one scientist's theory about possible groundwater flooding of the repository. In 1990 Jerry Szymanski, a geologist then working for the DOE, found mineral deposits that he believed proved that the water table far below the mountain had once welled up along a fault line, spilling out high above where the waste would be. "You flood that [waste] and you could blow the top of the mountain," geophysicist Charles Archambeau said at the time. But a National Academy of Science panel unanimously dismissed the theory, prompting Szymanski and a handful of other Yucca Mountain scientists to resign in protest.

Crowe himself called a press conference several years ago addressing concerns about one of the seven volcanoes that rise out of the desert floor

approximately 20 miles to the east of where we're standing. As a volcanologist, he was worried because the volcano was found to be much younger than was previously believed, having erupted 10,000 years ago instead of 2.1 million years ago like the others. "When I find things that are bad for the site, I have to bring that data forward," Crowe says. "When I find things that are good for the site, I have to bring that data forward." But like the possibility of flooding, the threat of a volcanic eruption was ultimately disregarded by both Crowe and the Energy Department; a DOE information packet simply concludes that the chance of an eruption in the next 10,000 years is "very unlikely." Even if it happens, the materials say, the magma would simply "flow quietly out of the volcano and outward on the ground" without disturbing the dump.

When asked why the DOE's scenario considers only the

next 10,000 years—even though the half-life of plutonium is 24,000 years—Crowe concedes, “That’s a good question.” He admits that the standards the Nuclear Regulatory Commission (NRC) has set for evaluating the long-term safety of the dump are relatively arbitrary, a kind of roulette for the unforeseeable future.

But the dispute over Crowe’s volcano is nothing compared to the debate that has raged since the publication of a March 5 *New York Times* exposé about the possibility of a spontaneous explosion at Yucca Mountain. The article described a theory advanced by Los Alamos National Laboratory geologist Charles Bowman, who described a frightening scenario wherein “the slowing of the neutrons could make an individual pile of plutonium explode in a nuclear blast equal in force to about a thousand tons of high explosive, setting off other blasts throughout the repository ... scattering radioactivity to the winds or into groundwater or both.”

Although Bowman’s theory was said to have been debated “quietly” among scientists for more than a year, since its publication it has been loudly denounced by many of Bowman’s colleagues and superiors. “It is unfortunate that the *New York Times* article has pre-empted our plan to handle this debate through the scientific process,” John Browne, head of the energy department at Los Alamos, wrote in an internal DOE letter that was released to the press after the controversy. “Nonetheless, we think that it is imperative to conclude this debate in as timely a way as possible.” Given the way other dissenting theories have been handled, dump critics fear that the debate will conclude with yet another green light for Yucca Mountain.

**D**espite the bad publicity, the DOE is continuing its efforts to convince Nevadans that Yucca Mountain, if it opens, will be safe. Nestled in one of Las Vegas’ hundreds of strip malls and surrounded by a sea of parking lots, the Yucca Mountain Science Center is one of several local energy department public relations outposts. Although under federal law the facility is supposed to provide neutral information, it is unabashedly pronuclear. Dubbed an atomic “Epcot Center” by its detractors, the center uses Disneyesque displays to present nuclear power as a high-tech panacea for the world’s mounting energy crisis and the dump as a modern scientific miracle.

Darin Taylor, the science center’s young, upbeat tour guide, directs visitors through the showroom, pushing buttons to light up the various dioramas and displays and leading people through the scale-model tunnel that simulates how the waste would be stored in Yucca Mountain. Taylor says he gets the most “positive feedback” from the fifth- and

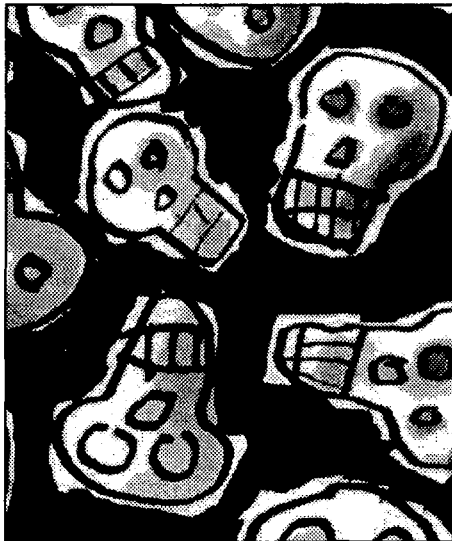
sixth-graders and scout troops who come to the center on field trips. “Kids are bright,” he says, smiling.

But the government’s long and troubled history of nuclear experiments in Nevada has made many adults deeply suspicious. “It has been 41 years since the first atmospheric detonation occurred at the Nevada Test Site outside of Las Vegas,” said Democratic state Sen. Richard Bryan during a congressional hearing in early March. “Nevadans, Utahans and Americans alike were assured there was absolutely no risk, no hazard, nothing to be concerned about. ... Well, we are now told that burying high-level nuclear waste is absolutely safe.” Bryan continued, “There is a relentless drumbeat of pressure and publicity, coordinated ... by the Department of Energy, which on this issue simply serves as a surrogate for the nuclear power industry.”

At the science center Bryan’s point is made painfully clear. One exhibit features the DOE’s “multipurpose” casks, the metal containers currently being developed both to transport and store nuclear waste. In a video loop playing on a small television, a cask is shown being dropped onto a spike, submerged under water, engulfed in fire, and plowed into by trains and trucks—surviving all the tests unscathed. In 1990, the same footage was brought into the homes of nearly a million Nevada residents as part of a \$9 million PR campaign sponsored by the American Nuclear Energy Council (ANEC), the nuclear industry’s most powerful lobbying group. Following the film clip, an ANEC executive exclaims, “None of the scientifically simulated radiation leaked out!”

But critics such as Anna Aurilio, a scientist with U.S. Public Interest Research Group in Washington, D.C., argue that the tests and the commercials distort the facts. “We think the criteria for testing those casks is unrealistic and unsafe,” says Aurilio. Despite the few tests shown in the video, the DOE “relies mostly on computer simulation,” she notes, adding that a worst-case scenario—an accident involving a truck plunging off a high bridge, or a diesel fire that burned longer and hotter than the fires the casks have been subjected to—could in fact rupture the containers.

Perhaps the most insidious distortion at the science center is the complete absence of discussion of alternative energy sources. Instead of showing the wide range of potential renewable energy sources, the DOE suggests that America must embrace atomic power—and contend with its attendant waste—or face a crippling future of brownouts. The nuclear industry’s version of the same message was much more brazen. According to “The Nevada Initiative,” an ANEC document leaked to the press in 1991, the purpose of its PR blitz was “to send the message that the nuclear





energy industry is in Nevada to stay and to create a sense of inevitability."

By 1991, however, a lengthy political fight had already established that sense of inevitability about Yucca Mountain. The desert site had been singled out as the only spot in the United States suitable for the permanent storage of atomic waste. Although federal officials argue that the site has been selected for purely scientific reasons, Nevadans suggest that they've been saddled with the dump because they lack the political power in Congress to block it. After all, in 1975 studies examining underground geologic formations for a dump were going on in 36 states. But, as representatives from more populous states under consideration such as New York and Ohio lodged protests, the number of sites under consideration soon narrowed. By 1983 only nine sites were being considered. In 1985 that number was cut to three. And then, as part of the amendments made in 1987 to the Nuclear Waste Policy Act, there was one: Yucca Mountain.

Today, Nevadans have a hard time believing that the tunneling going on at Yucca Mountain "is only a study," as DOE officials insist. And in recent months the political juggernaut behind the dump has revealed its true force. With his Nuclear Waste Policy Act of 1995, retiring Sen. Bennett Johnston (D-LA), who received more than \$200,000 in nuclear-industry PAC contributions between 1985 and 1991, would make Yucca Mountain an interim storage facility "at the earliest practicable date"—directly contradicting his own 1987 legislation, which prohibited such a facility. "Maintaining this prohibition is important to ensure that a permanent facility is not, in effect, a fait accompli," Bill Magavern, director of Public Citizen's Critical Mass Energy Project, told the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources on March 2.

If adopted, Johnston's bill will relax radiation standards at the dump, making the allowable releases into the air 25 times higher than what the EPA presently permits; undercut the Safe Drinking Water Act; give the president the right to waive all of Nevada's regulatory rights relating to nuclear waste; further undermine comprehensive research by directing the DOE, the NRC and other federal agencies to expedite permits for the facility; and revoke the \$20 million-per-year benefits package that, under the 1987 law, was to be given to Nevada for hosting the dump.

Worse, according to Magavern, is Michigan Congressman Fred Upton's bill, which "goes the extra mile to please the nuclear industry at public expense." Like Johnston, Upton advocates an interim-storage facility at Yucca Mountain and calls for the gutting of environmental standards for the permanent dump. But instead of simply trying to open a centralized interim facility at the "earliest practicable date,"

Upton's bill would force the DOE to take ownership of nuclear plants' high-level waste in 1998—regardless of whether there's anywhere to put it. Such a "deadline-driven policy," Magavern said, could potentially create a dangerous regulatory "twilight zone," making the DOE responsible for waste stored in more than 100 locations nationwide.

Like Johnston, Upton holds a vested interest in seeing nuclear waste brought to a centralized facility. His district in southwestern Michigan made national news last year by becoming home to a de facto high-level waste dump. After the Palisades Nuclear Plant in Covert, Mich., ran out of room in its underground pools in 1993, it began storing its waste on the plant grounds in 16-foot-tall cement casks. But because the utility placed the casks on sand dunes 150 yards from the shore of Lake Michigan—without filing an Environmental Impact Report or holding public hearings—Palisades invoked the wrath of nearby residents and several local environmental groups, who sued the plant and the NRC. (See *In These Times*, August 9, 1993.) Though the groups lost their case in January, they have appealed to the Supreme Court. And other cases like Palisades—at the Point

Beach nuclear plant in Wisconsin and at the Prairie Island plant in Minnesota—are making dry casking difficult and expensive for utilities.

But dry casking presents more than legal problems. Because the NRC has taken a relatively lax regulatory approach to dry casking—setting standards for the construction of casks, but declining to regulate their placement—industry critics say the process has become unnecessarily dangerous. By August 1994 welding flaws had already been discovered in one of the filled casks at Palisades, necessitating the unloading and reloading of the fuel rods and opening "the possibility of off-site releases and radiation expo-

sure to the public," according to Mary Olson of the Nuclear Information and Research Service in Washington, D.C.

Many environmentalists, especially those at Yucca Mountain, believe that with stricter regulations and ample public oversight, dry casking at power plants can be made to work temporarily. At least, they say, it would postpone the dangerous transportation of 15,000 shipments of nuclear waste across the country until a safe and democratic waste policy is devised. According to Magavern and other environmentalists, such a policy is long overdue. Instead of forcing political answers to scientific problems, Magavern urged stepping back and facing "a humbling truth"—that "there is no known means of guaranteeing the isolation of these toxins for their hazardous lifetime."

Shea Dean is a San Francisco-based freelance writer.

*"An individual  
pile of plutonium  
[could] explode ...  
scattering  
radioactivity to  
the winds or into  
groundwater  
or both."*

**H EALTH C A R E**

# Managed misery

*The GOP's  
balanced  
budget plans  
offer a brutal  
prescription  
for public  
health.*

By David Moberg

**F**ive years ago, Florida state officials decided that they wanted to save money on Medicaid coverage for poor people by encouraging private, for-profit health maintenance organizations (HMOs) to sign them up. While there are serious doubts that the state has saved money, there is no doubt that HMO owners have done fabulously. Several HMOs spend more than half the Medicaid funds they receive on administrative costs—pouring the money into aggressive marketing schemes and lavish executive salaries. The owners of one private Medicaid plan—launched in 1992 for \$485,000—sold it two years later for \$35 million.

Meanwhile, according to an investigative series in the *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, patients under the private plans have suffered from notoriously shabby care. A sample of state audits indicated that four-

fifths of the Medicaid HMOs provided “poor” or “very poor” care.

Florida’s experience with privatized health care should be a red flag to the rest of the country as congressional Republicans begin their drive for a balanced budget. Roughly one-third of the projected savings in federal spending is slated to come from restructuring Medicare (the national health insurance program for the elderly) and Medicaid (the joint federal and state plan that covers the poor, disabled and elderly in nursing homes).

Over seven years, the GOP’s Senate proposal would cut \$256 billion from anticipated Medicare budgets and \$175 billion from Medicaid, cutting the rate of growth for both plans in half. But Republicans aren’t saying how that will be done. The tough decisions have been consigned to that favorite escape-hatch, a bipartisan commission.

Yet there are plenty of indications of the kind of changes that will come, and they’re not pretty. Judging from the ideas under discussion, it is clear that the GOP intends to cut costs in two ways. First, the government will shift many costs to the elderly, poor and disabled by increasing their out-of-pocket expenses. Second, the scope and quality of health care will be reduced. The government may save some money, but people covered by the programs will end up getting worse care or no care at all.

In theory, savings could be realized by making the systems more efficient. But it is unlikely that the ideas under consideration will do that; in fact, they may do just the opposite. The Republican plans rely on pushing more people into private HMOs and other managed care organizations. But the administrative costs of HMOs and private insurance companies are far higher than those for either Medicare or Medicaid. To make matters worse, there’s a good chance that any savings will end up in the pockets of the mushrooming for-profit managed care organizations.

Ironically, the Republicans’ current health care plans resemble the Clinton health care reforms that the GOP denounced last year. But the GOP proposals are even worse, offering a warmed-over Clinton plan without establishing any professional standards, public accountability or adequate funding.

Republicans insist that they are not cutting Medicare and Medicaid simply to balance the budget. They are “saving” Medicare, they argue, perhaps even improving it. But it’s reminiscent of the Vietnam War tactic of “destroying the village in order to save it.” The Republican cuts go beyond what is needed to maintain the solvency of the Medicare hospital trust fund, which is expected to go bankrupt in 2002 unless costs are reduced or revenue increased. The health cuts are thus likely to end up financing the GOP’s

regressive tax bill, which gives 41 percent of \$189 billion in proposed tax cuts to the richest 13 percent of families.

In light of the GOP's tax proposals, Republican expressions of concern for the Medicare trust fund ring hollow: The Republican plan reverses a 1993 Clinton-initiated tax on the Social Security benefits of upper-income retirees that would have generated \$87 billion for Medicare over 10 years.

ominously, Medicaid, now an entitlement program, seems likely to be converted into a block grant program. As Jeff Kirsch, field director of Families USA, a health care reform group, argues, "block grants become a way of cutting back funding." Unlike entitlement programs, which must provide benefits to any person who qualifies, block grants provide a fixed level of funding. Once that funding is exhausted, no more benefits are distributed—meaning, in the case of Medicaid, that poor, disabled and elderly recipients will lose their right to coverage. During recessions, as the ranks of the needy swell—and demands on the block grants increase—growing numbers of people are likely to find themselves without any health coverage.

Turning Medicaid into a block grant would also loosen the federal standards that states must now meet. Already seven states have won waivers that allow them, like Florida, to run start-up programs that emphasize moving Medicaid recipients into private, largely for-profit managed care plans. And the record on managed care within Medicare and Medicaid so far has been unimpressive at best. The five-part report in the *Sun-Sentinel* documented "widespread enrollment fraud, inadequate medical services and rampant profiteering." People were deceptively lured into many HMOs, which provided inadequate care and pocketed up to 77 percent of the tax-financed premiums on administration (compared to 3.5 percent administrative costs nationwide for Medicaid). Florida's Medicaid HMOs, which have been created as second-rate programs to serve only poor recipients, have quickly generated executive salaries of more than \$1 million a year and earned tens of millions of dollars in windfall profits for entrepreneurs whose organizations are almost entirely financed by taxpayers.

Florida isn't the only example. An experiment with private Medicaid coverage in Tennessee, known as TennCare, "shoehorns the poor and uninsured into hastily contrived, largely untested, managed care schemes," according to Larry Gage, president of the Washington, D.C.-based National Association of Public Hospitals. Enrollees got little information about the plans but often received illegal financial incentives to enroll. The hastily enacted plan resulted in confusion, inadequate service and a general breakdown in the system. "TennCare teaches us above all that managed care in and of itself is no panacea," Gage says.

Of course, Medicaid as it now exists is far from a stellar program. Although it is identified in the public mind as medical insurance for the indigent, Medicaid fails to cover many of the poor and grossly underpays physicians and

hospitals who treat Medicaid patients. And, although it is true that poor recipients comprise the majority of Medicaid's beneficiaries, the bulk of the program's costs come from long-term care for the elderly and care of the disabled.

Overall, managed care might bring about some savings by shortening hospital stays and increasing the use of outpatient services, a Families USA study concluded, but there is no way that even the best managed care plan could deliver all the cuts that the Republicans are proposing.

Although Medicaid has done the most experimenting with private managed care plans, the track record of HMOs that have signed up Medicare recipients under a pilot program is equally discouraging. The Medicare HMOs have designed their marketing in an effort to "cherry-pick" the healthiest elderly—who will use the fewest services—in areas where the federal government pays the highest rates to managed care organizations. As a result, according to a study published last September by the General Accounting Office, the government spent 6 percent to 28 percent more on Medicare recipients enrolled in private HMOs than it did on patients who received traditional direct Medicare coverage. Other studies have demonstrated that Medicare HMOs achieved savings not by offering services more efficiently, but by cutting services, such as home care visits.

Conservatives argue that if old people have to pay more for health care, they will use less of it and thus save costs. But Kirsch argues: "[I]f you raise deductions they will probably go to a doctor less, but I don't think that's a good thing. With few exceptions, I don't know of people who go to the doctor for fun. The market just doesn't work in health care. There has to be a way of cracking down on the industry."

The problem of skyrocketing Medicare and Medicaid costs lies with the irrationality of the whole system, especially the excessive overhead created by private insurance. (Private insurance companies devote roughly 16 percent of their budget on administrative expenses, compared to 2 percent for the Medicare system.) In addition, the health care industry suffers from duplication of technology, price-gouging by pharmaceutical companies, and excessive profits and salaries, especially in the growing for-profit sector. By contrast, a single-payer national health insurance system could reduce health care expenditures by \$175 billion per year in 2004, according to a 1993 Congressional Budget Office study. It could also provide universal coverage, preserve and improve benefits, and permit a deficit reduction of nearly \$100 billion per year by 2004, according to a 1994 study by the Joint Committee on Taxation.

Pressing for single-payer may seem utopian given the current make-up of Congress, but the contrast between it and other plans is so stark that it deserves to be at the forefront of every budget discussion. Americans need to be constantly reminded that they have an alternative to the cruel corporate fraud offered by the Republicans. ◀



# I N T H E A R T S

## The round world made flat

T

he strain of being cast by Hollywood producers in the role of Ms. Multicultural is beginning to show on director Mira Nair. *The Perez Family*, her latest film, vamps for the viewer as shamelessly as its central character celebrates her own sexuality. Nair deploys an astoundingly talented mix of character actors in the service of silliness, and assimilates Cuban-American culture to film formulas that turn it into local color.

**The Perez Family succumbs to caricature in the service of multicultural marketing.**

By Pat Aufderheide

It's a disappointment from a major film talent. In the past, Nair has deftly and daringly combined a fascination with the cultures of immigration and exile with an understanding of the appeal of entertainment cinema. From her starting point in the Indian-American community, Nair first made revealing documentaries about Indian immigrants and the lives of Indi-

an women. She went on to make (with the help of the Indian government) the dramatically rich *Salaam Bombay!* (1988), about street urchins in India. Her 1991 *Mississippi Masala* introduced black America to Indian-Americans and these two communities, in turn, to broad American audiences looking for love stories. She thus raised issues of bias and cultural gaps among the groups caught under the broad multicultural umbrella, while energetically tweaking tried-and-true story formulas.

These tensions and textures of multicultural life are crying out for chroniclers. At the same time, major manufacturers of popular culture—Time Warner, Sony, Newscorp and other conglomerates—are too busy concocting products that can be endlessly repackaged (the movie, the book, the poster, the CD, the video game, the lunchbox) to be bothered with the particulars of cultural representation.

So the efforts of a Mira Nair, and those who back her, are worth a good look. (*The Perez Family* is distributed by one of America's few really independent film companies

capable of launching a national release, the Samuel Goldwyn Co.) Unfortunately, *The Perez Family* doesn't hold together under close scrutiny.

Drawn from a novel by Christine Bell, the movie tells stories from the dramatic days of 1980, when Fidel Castro's sudden release of many "undesirables" challenged the world of Miami's "Little Havana."

Political prisoner Juan Raul Perez (Alfred Molina, familiar to arthouse filmgoers from *Enchanted April* and *Prick Up Your Ears*) and bad girl Dottie (Marisa Tomei, plus 20 voluptuous pounds) get on the same boat out of Cuba. He's soberly pining for his long-lost wife Carmela (Anjelica Huston) and mourning the youth he spent rotting in jail. Dottie just wants freedom—as in the right to party.

Meanwhile, the ever-prim Carmela rearranges the furniture in the fortress home that her rabidly anti-crime, anti-Castro brother Angel (Diego Wallraff) has made for her. She's so insulated from the world that only one man is able to establish contact with



**The Perez Family**  
Directed by Mira Nair



her: the attractive, divorced Lt. Pirelli (Chazz Palminteri).

From that point on, if you've ever seen a screwball comedy, you know that the machinery is in place. The plot involves a series of mistaken identities, misunderstandings, white lies that turn into major mishaps, and a reconciliation that allows everyone to find true love and understanding. Also thrown into the mix are guns, sex, some drop-dead costumes, and a soundtrack that is as full-blast as the rest of the film.

The problem is that the premise reduces every conflict to the search for sexual fulfillment, which makes for a one-dimensional universe in which the characters get either to titillate or irritate the audience. The camera becomes a voyeur with a vengeance. For instance, as the boat arrives on the Florida shore, in a burst of enthusiasm Tomei jumps off ship to swim to shore. She then arises slowly from the water, her brilliant dress draped over ripe body parts, looking as if she were auditioning for the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit issue. In a scene that's played for a good snicker—and equal time in the politics of body exposure—a local cop accidentally appears in a movie-screen spotlight, looking like he could have sauntered out of *Playgirl*.

Nair clearly means for us not merely to gawk but to grasp the parallel between sexual freedom and all social

desire. Dottie gets the opening line when she talks back to her sugar cane supervisor, who leers and sneers at her in a Classic Comic Communist way: "I am like Cuba," she says. "Used by many, conquered by no one." Dottie's sexual energy—aka life force aka search for freedom—is what energizes, complicates and eventually resolves the relationships around her.

Tomei is the big beneficiary of this premise, which gives her full license to ham it up. Molina, by contrast, often looks simply stricken in his attempt to respond. The big loser, however, is Huston. An actress who radiates power, she looks painfully determined in her efforts to be demure.

This screwball comedy of sensuality avoids many of the challenges that Nair has so boldly tackled in the past. It caricatures without delivering the insights of satire. The cultures of Little Havana are reduced to a salsa-beat tropicalism with hot-blooded, Latin-lover/macho-brother stereotypes.

*The Perez Family* bumps and grinds its way enthusiastically into your consciousness. And if you're familiar with Cuban-American culture, the film offers plenty of in-jokes and sly takes. But it's also hard not to feel tired, and maybe a little used, at the end—and still wondering when we'll stop seeing our many American cultures as exotic spice to a bland-but-safe cultural diet.



# I N P R I N T

## Pills-a-poppin'

By Leora Tanenbaum

**T**hirty-five years ago last week, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) authorized use of the pill as a form of birth control. To mark the event, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists hosted a birthday party, complete with a teal-colored cake in the shape of a pill dispenser.

There is a great deal to celebrate, for FDA approval of the pill inaugurated an enormous social revolution. Women were ecstatic about their new contraceptive option. Greater control over reproduction offered them unprecedented sexual freedom, and since the pill was ingested, it separated birth control from the sexual act. Unlike barrier methods of contraception, the pill allowed its users the luxury of pretending that it had nothing to do with sexuality—and, hence, provided the cover of moral purity in public debate. Perhaps most important, the pill altered the biological connection between sex and reproduction: For the first time, women could pursue sexual pleasure and map out the lives they desired, the way men always could. The pill soon became a staple in many women's lives: nearly 10 million women in the United States, and another 50 million women around the world, use it.

The pill's medical effects, however, have not been as much cause for celebration. In its first decade, the pill's side effects included blood clots, heart attacks, strokes, depression, obesity and, ironically, a diminished sex drive. Thousands of women around the world died from complications associated with taking it. Today, the pill's hormone levels are greatly reduced—researchers have discovered that lower dosages are safer and do not compromise the pill's effectiveness—and several types of pill are available to fit the needs of different women. Nonetheless, the pill continues to pose serious health risks to many of its users.

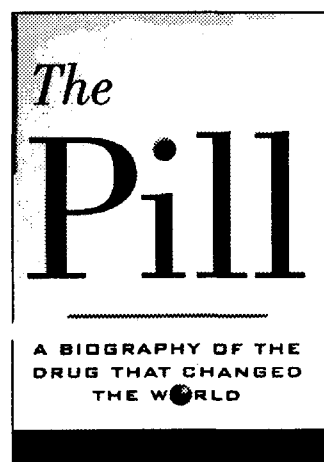
The pill has another downside as well: its use as a method of population control. In the '60s and early '70s, politicians and health officials brushed aside fears about its health hazards as they trumpeted its value in controlling global overpopulation. In effect, they made the calculated

judgment that in the face of the population crisis, women's lives were expendable.

Unfortunately, *The Pill*—a new book that's been packaged to coincide with the pill's anniversary—glosses over the darker side of the pill's development and proliferation: Bernard Asbell, an author who has written about science, education and politics, offers instead a breathless account of the drug's evolution. He researched every facet of the pill's history, from the early support for the pill's development among socialist-feminists to the science involved in its creation to the response of the Roman Catholic Church. But despite Asbell's clear intention to be an objective, authoritative historian, he serves as a cheerleader. This is less a biography than a hagiography.

The pill was conceived—as it were—at a New York dinner in 1951, according to Asbell, when Planned Parenthood founder Margaret Sanger asked Gregory Pincus, an expert in female fertility, to develop the “perfect contraceptive,” one that could be “swallowed like an aspirin.” Sanger was a longtime activist on behalf of impoverished women who could not afford, economically or physically, to bear large numbers of children. (Sanger's own mother, Asbell notes, died at the age of 50 after giving birth to 11 children and suffering seven miscarriages.) Sanger's feminist ally was Katherine McCormick, one of the first women to earn a biology degree at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She was also, as it happens, enormously wealthy; her father-in-law had invented the mechanical reaper. McCormick, whom Sanger had also invited to dinner, happily wrote out a check for \$40,000 and handed it to Pincus.

Sanger's concern for the plight of desperate women was undeniably genuine. But she also maintained that some classes of women, and men, were more valuable than others—a fact that receives no critical attention in *The Pill*. In particular, Sanger felt that the retarded, the insane and the otherwise mentally unstable were “unfit” members of society and that their numbers should be reduced. Sanger, in other words, advocated birth control not merely as a solution for those who chose to limit their fertility; it was also a means to rein in the reproductive habits of certain groups, regardless of whether or not they sought birth control. Sanger made such measures a central platform in her early campaign for birth control, which helped



**The Pill: The Biography of the Drug That Changed the World**  
By Bernard Asbell  
Random House  
400pp., \$25.00



it gain acceptance and respectability. In 1926, she went to Europe to organize a World Population Conference and promote her belief that birth control could be used as a form of eugenics. "No longer would her appeal center on rescuing overburdened mothers from overlarge families of children, even less on separating the fear of pregnancy from the pleasures of sex," writes Asbell. "Her new constituency—the educated, rich, and influential—[was] more ready to accept the high-minded, impersonal ground of a worldwide social problem than the embarrassing subject of sex."

Even as late as 1950, Sanger wrote to McCormick that "there should be national sterilization for certain dysgenic types of our population who are being encouraged to breed and would die out were the government not feeding them." (There is no evidence that Sanger won McCormick over to the eugenics crusade.) All Asbell offers on the subject of Sanger's scorn for the "dysgenic" is the matter-of-fact observation that Sanger was later persuaded by her colleagues at Planned Parenthood to drop her call for sterilization.

A large chunk of *The Pill* is devoted to scientific research and development. Asbell recounts in numbing detail how several research scientists—who knew nothing about Sanger's mission and were not seeking birth control at all—discovered the means to extract estrogen and progesterone, the hormones used in the pill, and convert them into an orally ingested drug. Pincus discovered, in 1952, that the chemistry of the pill had already been developed, and was even being tested on humans by another fertility specialist, John Rock. The two researchers teamed up under the guidance of Sanger and McCormick with the goal of perfecting the new invention.

They went to Puerto Rico, where they tested the pill on residents of a housing project who were desperate to control their fertility. In all, 897 women were tested. Many of the women reported side effects, including dizziness, headaches and other unpleasant reactions. Asbell neglects to report that five of the women died during the study. He also fails to note that 718 of the women were on the pill for less than a year—which at the very least suggests that the drug's original testing was incomplete.

None of the pharmaceutical companies wanted to touch the newly developed drug. It was morality, not product liability, that troubled them. After all, even in the late '50s, 17



states outlawed the sale, distribution, or advertising of contraceptives. (It wasn't until 1965 that the Supreme Court declared unconstitutional a Connecticut statute that outlawed all forms of contraception, and it was not until 1983 that the court struck down a federal law banning unsolicited advertisements for contraceptives through the mail.)

But in 1957, Enovid—as the pill was called by the Searle drug company—was approved by the FDA for treatment of menstrual disorders. The secret was soon out that Enovid could also be used for birth control, and by 1959 half a mil-

lion women were suddenly complaining of menstrual disorders. Since so many were already using the drug for birth control, Searle decided to file an application to license Enovid as a contraceptive. Despite its limited field trials and the lack of information about its long-term effects, the pill was formally approved by the FDA on May 11, 1960. As Asbell triumphantly puts it, "[t]he perfect contraceptive was born."

Asbell belittles the efforts of feminists concerned about the safety of the pill—particularly the former health columnist Barbara Seaman, author of the landmark exposé *The Doctors' Case Against The Pill*, which was first published in 1969 and is currently being reissued by Hunter House Publishing. Seaman argued that women who decided to take the pill were making an uninformed choice. Indeed, a 1970 Newsweek-Gallup poll revealed that two-thirds of the women taking the pill had never been warned by their physicians of any hazards. Seaman's book and lobbying efforts attracted the respectful attention of Senator Gaylord Nelson (D-WI), who decided to convene hearings in 1970 to investigate the full extent of the health risks. Because of the revelations that emerged from those hearings, the FDA ordered manufacturers to insert warnings in each pill packet to reach consumers directly, an unusual procedure at the time. The American Medical Association and the pharmaceutical industry vehemently opposed the move.

Even today, according to Seaman, the pill continues to pose many serious dangers, including increased risks of cancer, infertility, and heart attacks and strokes. And doctors

continue to fail to warn patients with high cholesterol levels, abnormal blood sugar levels and high blood pressure that the pill may be hazardous for them, Seaman argues. Asbell, for his part, concedes that the pill is still not safe for many women. But all in all, "for most healthy women the pill provides a safe, effective means of birth control with some possible beneficial health effects," he concludes.

Even if the pill were completely safe, it makes little sense to use it today in the age of AIDS, Seaman contends in the new edition of *The Doctors' Case*. Although manufacturers claim that the pill is nearly 100 percent effective as a method of birth control, it is not foolproof—there are, in fact, about two pregnancies per one hundred women a year. In other words, the pill is no more reliable than the combined use of a condom and foam, or a condom and diaphragm. But Asbell is silent on this point. In fact, his assessment of barrier methods of birth control is rather glum; he approvingly quotes a 19th-century physician who denounced the pessary—the precursor to the diaphragm and cervical cap—as "outrageous."

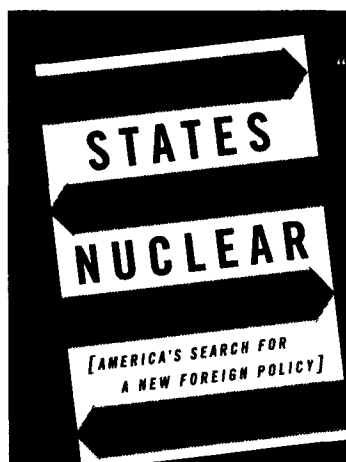
Asbell prefers the pill above all other contraceptive choices. He implies that women who lack formal education are unable to use barrier methods properly, because such methods require careful practice and knowledge of one's reproductive biology. Never mind that any woman desperate to control her fertility would be eager to learn any method it takes. Why waste time educating women when you can more easily—and profitably—medicalize them?

Asbell also toes the pill party line on population control, arguing for the wide dissemination of the pill and other hormonal contraceptives to women in the Third World. In particular he heralds Norplant—a set of six matchstick-sized capsules with progestin that are inserted in a woman's arm, which won FDA approval in 1991—and Depo-Provera, an injectable progestin, which won agency approval in 1992. Both methods cause a host of side effects, from the annoying to the dangerous. And they are both pushed aggressively onto millions of disadvantaged women who lack access to other, safer alternatives. Asbell seems unconcerned about the fact that after Norplant's approval, 13 states considered bills that would force women on welfare to take it.

The more things change, then, the more they stay the same. Although technology and science have advanced, birth control is still being used for the eugenic ends originally advocated by Margaret Sanger: controlling the fertility of "undesirable" women.

The pill has changed millions of lives for the better. But it is not for everyone, and those who choose to use it need to be informed of the risks. A more even-handed history would have served pill users far better than does *The Pill*. This is no time to let drug companies have their cake and eat it too.

**Leora Tanenbaum** is a contributing writer at *The Boston Phoenix* and a regular contributor to *In These Times*. She lives in New York City.



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# Debts of a salesman

By Scott McLemee

Remember derivatives? They are financial "instruments," in the jargon of the investment trade; and they were in the news, briefly, not long ago. Orange County went bankrupt after some fluctuations in the derivatives market. A few weeks later, the eminent British investment bank Barings found that several hundred million pounds of its money had vanished from its Singapore branch, thanks to the efforts of a derivatives-happy investment banker (who then, prudently, disappeared himself). As the joke reported in *The Journal of Accountancy* has it, a derivative may be defined as "any transaction this year that resulted in a loss."

That, presumably, is about as hilarious as accounting ever gets. And yet derivatives themselves are funny things. Scarcely anyone really understands them: The value of derivatives is calculated through mathematical formulae of a complexity more appropriate to describing, say, the physics of a black hole than to balancing a checkbook. The people purchasing these "instruments" have no idea what they are buying. The people selling them are, in equal measure, vague on the concept.

Even so, banks and retirement funds and city portfolios have invested billions of dollars in the derivatives market. Everybody just figures that someone, somewhere, knows what is going on. (Capitalism is, after all, a rational economic system.)

Clearly, this is a situation ripe for satire—the literary genre devoted to exposing avarice, fraud and the vanity of human wishes. But there is a problem. When things are already so matter-of-factly absurd, how much scope does the satirical imagination really have?

A difficult question, that; and one that comes to mind repeatedly while reading *Bombardiers*, Po Bronson's heavily promoted first novel. The author worked for a time at First Boston Corp. And the cover photo—showing Bronson in suit and tie, outside some downtown office building—

emphasizes the publicists' message that *Bombardiers* is an inside account of the business world. To further tout Bronson's expertise, Random House has also launched a promotional campaign in which reviewers can buy actual Bombardiers Obligation Notes Duplicating Sales (B.O.N.D.S.), a gimmick that might be described as excruciatingly cute—and that, in any case, gives every indication of missing the satirical point.

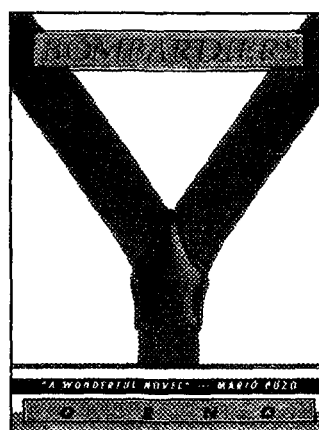
Bronson's satire is set in the offices of Atlantic Pacific, a company marketing bonds to investors around the world. There, salespeople work the phones from four in the morning until well after sundown, talking customers into buying "debt instruments" neither party quite understands. There is a plot, of sorts: The story moves toward a Big Deal, in which a business consortium launches a hostile takeover of the Dominican Republic. But this seems almost an afterthought. In this book, atmosphere—the blend of amoral cynicism and imminent burnout among the characters—is everything.

It can be, at times, a very funny book—and its picture of the world of high finance seems almost frighteningly believable. The salespeople of Atlantic Pacific are glibness incarnate: "In the heat of the sale, they needed to keep talking, and they said whatever came to them, as long as they didn't blatantly lie, as long as it was just color commentary, as long as the fictions were just part of the overall fabric." Each day, they must sell so many million dollars' worth of bonds, and can be fired if they don't. And the reward for meeting a quota is, of course, a higher quota.

Much of Bronson's humor comes from the quirks and obsessions his characters have developed to cope with their jobs. The firm's top salesman (and the book's antihero) is Sidney Geeder, who, "as revenge against being made to sell bonds ... sold even more bonds. He had no confidence in the debt instruments he was selling, and so to assuage his guilt he sold them to everyone he hated. He trained himself to hate everyone he sold to, so he suffered no guilt and avoided psychological malfunction."

Geeder assures a customer that the bond he is offering has "a 'marshmallow-creme center' under a 'buffalo-hide cover,' with a 'knuckleball's seam' that causes it, while the market is moving, to 'float in the wind.'" There must be some magic in mixing all those metaphors: Suitably baffled, the customer invests.

A good ear for blarney is one prerequisite for satire.



**Bombardiers**  
By Po Bronson  
Random House  
319 pp., \$22.00



The pages Bronson devotes to skewering the pitchman's argot are the best in the book. Indeed, the novel seems an act of revenge for the two years Bronson spent at First Boston Corp. Yet however much *Bombardiers* may draw from the author's experience in the business, it owes even more to Joseph Heller's *Catch-22*.

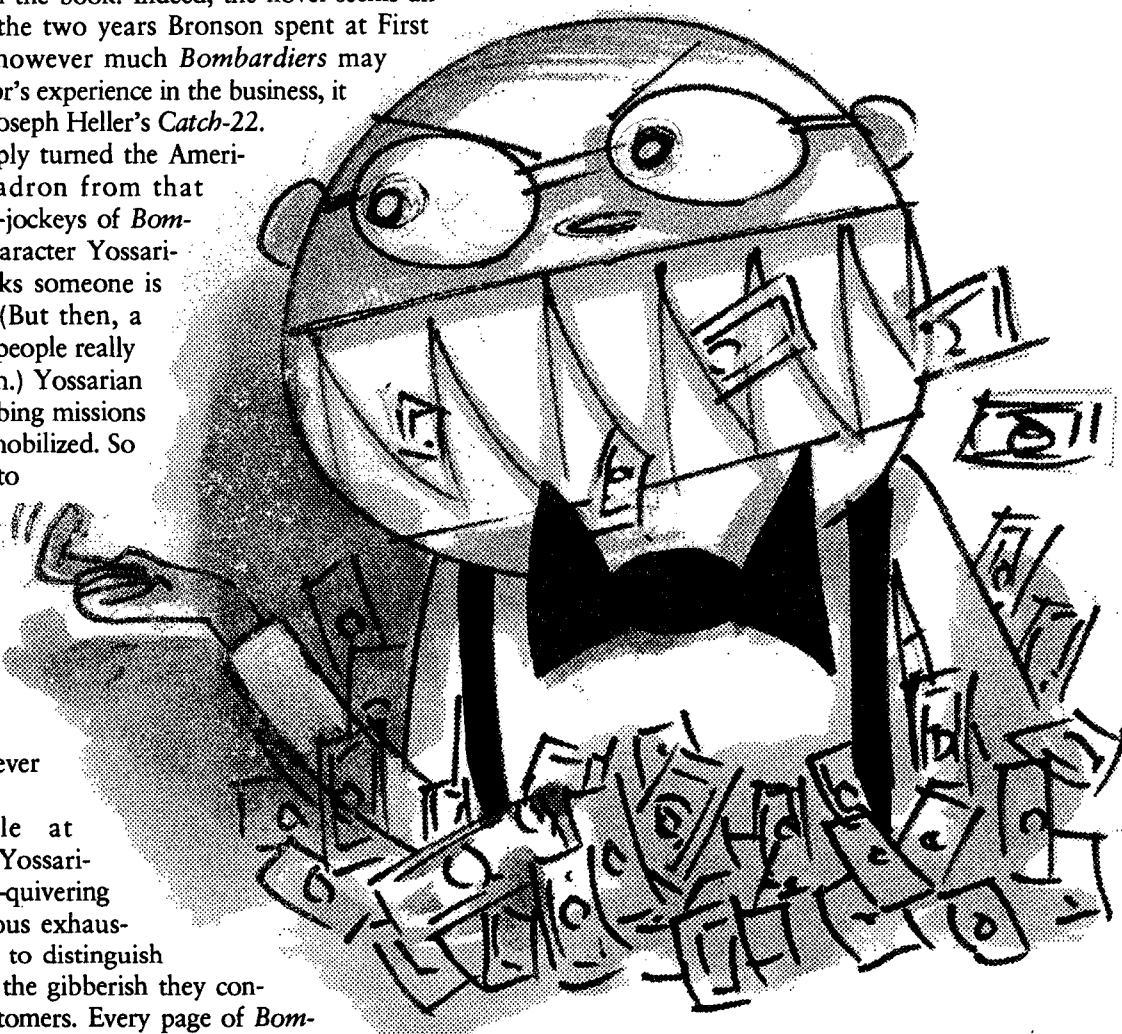
Bronson has simply turned the American bombing squadron from that novel into the bond-jockeys of *Bombardiers*. Heller's character Yossarian is crazy: he thinks someone is trying to kill him. (But then, a world war is on, so people really *are* trying to kill him.) Yossarian needs to fly 50 bombing missions before he can be demobilized. So he flies them—only to find that the general has raised the quota to 55. Then 60. For, as the general reasonably surmises, a bombardier who can meet the quota is much too valuable ever to be demobilized.

The salespeople at Atlantic Pacific are Yossarian's grandchildren—quivering at the edge of nervous exhaustion, no longer able to distinguish between reality and the gibberish they concoct to befuddle customers. Every page of *Bombardiers* is saturated by Heller's central insight: namely, that in a crazy system, sane people are at a hopeless disadvantage.

Now, there is no reason why Po Bronson should not borrow as much as he wants from *Catch-22*. It's good to see a 30-year-old writer alluding to a novel older than he is—rather than to, say, MTV. Yet if *Bombardiers* seems, finally, dissatisfying, it's in part because Bronson adds so little to what he has taken from Heller. The author's background yields information about the world of bond salesmen. But the novel's imaginative structure—the principle or design through which the raw material of experience gets shaped into characters and narrative—comes directly, and without increment, from *Catch-22*.

And so *Bombardiers*, after the first 50 or 60 pages, begins to read like a very clever short story that doesn't know when to quit. It recycles the same jokes for more than 300 pages. The jokes aren't bad, the first time around; but the cumulative effect is unfortunate.

Is this a failure of the imagination on Bronson's part? Is it simply an effect of writing a novel with a novella's worth of material? Or does it perhaps reflect that much larger diffi-



culty of lampooning a reality that is already absurd?

In at least one telling moment, the novel tilts toward the conclusion that the unstable conditions of reality have devalued the currency of satire. Toward the end of *Bombardiers*, the writing briefly sharpens up, as the central plot twist kicks in: Atlantic Pacific begins marketing bonds for New Lincoln, Inc.—an enterprise “partially owned by a consortium of military contractors” that plans “to foreclose on the Dominican Republic’s bad debts and take control of the assets of the Dominican government. As a Delaware corporation, the Dominican Republic would then fall under the jurisdiction of Delaware corporate law.”

The border between satire and the headlines becomes, for a moment, awfully blurry. Heller’s novel of military schizophrenia then seems like the perfect prism through which to view the world of bond trading: High finance very much resembles war continued by other means. And at least one reader put down *Bombardiers* with a vague feeling of panic—from the thought that, one day, the whole system will probably collapse under the weight of its own cynicism and absurdity. In which case the jokes might not seem so very goddamn funny.

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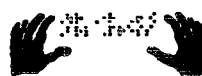
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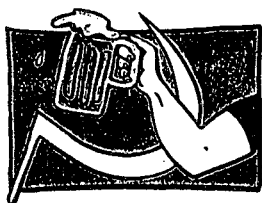
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*Continued from page 40*

and once, Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* provided America's favorite assuaging narrative, a bracing fusion of hero's quest and jeremiad. Franklin's ascent from rags to riches and sin to righteousness symbolized each American's infinite potential to become both a smashing success and a moral paragon. The traditional commencement speech has been but a truncated version of the same.

But today's college seniors, unless recklessly delusional, cry for little more than a lifetime free from chronic insecurity. Anxieties once reserved for the traditionally underprivileged have begun bubbling upward, inexorably, to the professional classes as well. Cash-strapped corporations wallpaper the corridors of power with worthless résumés like Weimar Germans used Deutsch marks. Even corporate success carries a different resonance than it did in days of old. Now, the management literature tells us, success will fall to those steely souls who are willing to move, switch career paths, cut their own opportunities out of whole cloth, forsaking antique notions like "job security." So the old-school commencement speech's enabling gap between what is present and what is possible has stretched into an unbridgeable chasm; the social contract that sustained it now enjoys all the trustworthiness of a 19th-century Indian treaty.

And here's where Cathy comes in. Doctor Guisewite is introduced by the dean in time-honored commencement day fashion. She is held up as a hero, that is, a model of the professional woman at the top of her field, an important voice of conscience in a difficult world. But then things take a turn for the banal. Guisewite starts off by thanking the Regents for having the courage to call on a speaker who "publicly admitted to hiding in the ladies room with a box of donuts," "has called in sick because her brain won't start," "balances her checkbook by changing banks and starting over," and believes "that success is something we have to earn each day, each in our own way."

She tells a story of her college days: "I took a whole class on one book, James Joyce's *Ulysses*. By the time of the exam I hadn't opened it—I never even made it through the Cliff Notes. I only knew it had something to do with a guy in Ireland." She heads to the final exam as if to the gallows, scribbles in her blue book, is the last one to turn it in. And, lo and behold, gets an A-! "It was then," she says, "that I realized I had a gift for creative writing. When I see that U. blue book, I know who I am."

One would think that someone syndicated in 1,200 papers, who in 1992 was voted by her her peers as "outstanding cartoonist," who has been nominated for an Emmy, won an Eleanor Roosevelt Humanities award, and was awarded an honorary doctorate from her alma mater might count herself as a success. But that is not the case. In fact she paints herself, as she does in her quite autobiographical comic, as a wretch. But then, if the traditional commencement speech offered stirring myths of success, this new mythology—which actually looks a bit more like reality than mythology is supposed to—does its psychic work by

conflating the mundanity of the speaker with the mundane prospects of the graduates. "The only thing I succeeded at in college," she assures them, "is failing." The cry is not, she made it, why can't I? It's, she more or less manages, why can't I? In place of I can! I will! I must!, is, well, I might? Her myth's not morphine, it's Prozac: eminently licit, edge-smoothing pharmacology; a drug for coping, not for soaring or sedation, for performance in the face of pain.

Thus, Guisewite organizes the rest of her speech around four platitudes that look more like the coping strategies one would find in a pop psychology text than anything else:

One: "Give up the quest for perfection and shoot for five good minutes in a row." By way of justification, she offers that it's probably best not to "take on too much and succeed at less." Her only obstacles in life, she explains, are "walls I build up myself and bang my head against."

Two: "Know who you love"—although she might have added "and hate." For in the speech, as in her comic, she alternates between veneration and venom when speaking of her mother. Here, the heroic individualism that anchors American myth—Ben Franklin writes in his *Autobiography* about leaving Boston and his 16 brothers and sisters for Philadelphia at the age of 17—falls away; in its place, Guisewite enshrines a mother/daughter relationship that would be positively umbilical if it weren't cloaked in so much thinly veiled hostility.

Three: "Take a stand." Fair enough, and here we seem to be in traditional graduation waters. I think back to my sister's college graduation from a prestigious Eastern liberal arts school. The speaker was Morris Dees, founder of the Southern Poverty Law Center, a lawyer who has consistently risked his life to put Ku Klux Klan terrorists behind bars. Hearing him speak was exhilarating; however, his sort is not exactly the kind of stand Guisewite's talking about. "Defy your group," she urges. "Rebel against yourself." Here, dissent is a jumbled interior affair, a matter of trying on defiance for size. And "defying your group" and "rebellious against yourself" are mutually contradictory propositions, aren't they? But, if it feels good, do it; redeeming the polis seems to be no longer on the agenda.

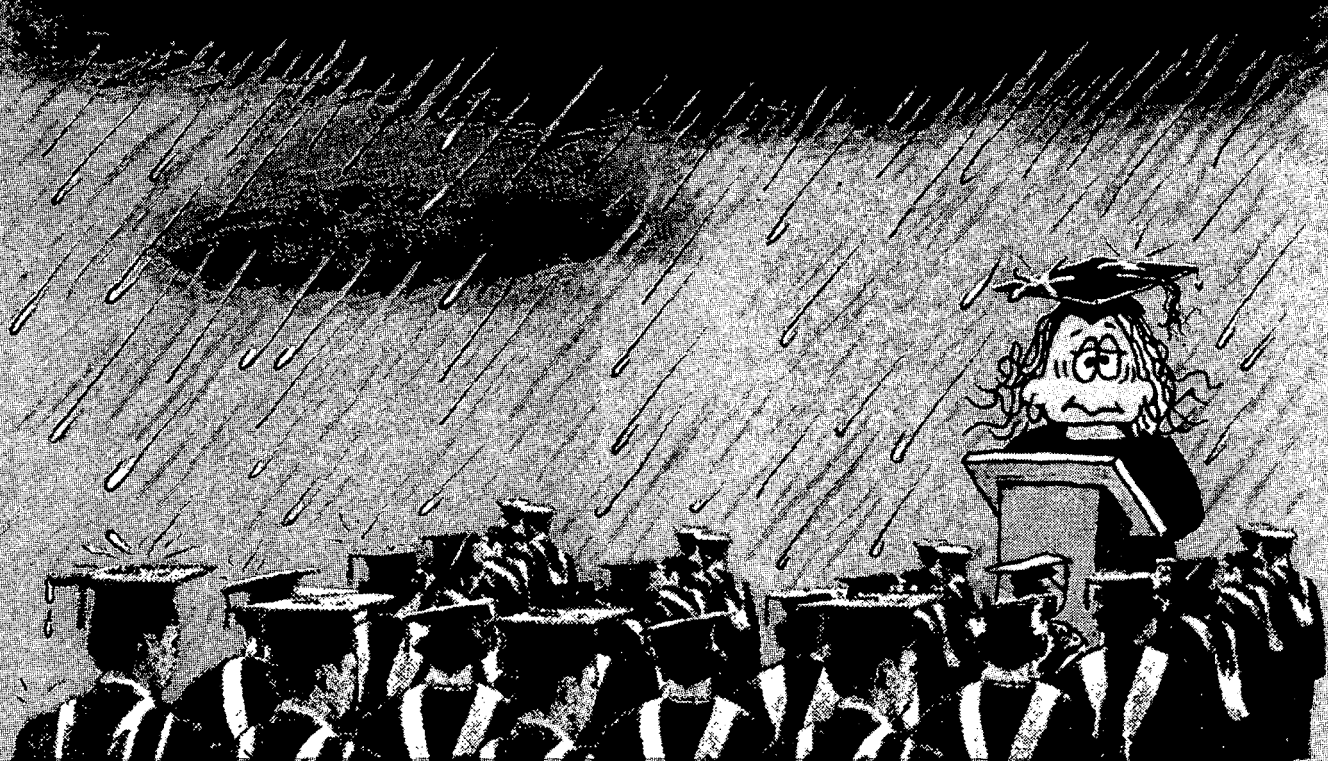
Four: "Graduate every four years." Now, as I have noted above, this is what the corporations have been telling middle managers for some time now. And to urge them on the way, companies are "graduating" a lot of them these days. The Guisewitian imagination is resigned to this: The reassuringly heroic arc of an idealized life cycle from birth to obituary is replaced with a series of four-year episodes. And so the speech drifts off into a diffident conclusion, and Cathy leaves the podium to some not immodest cheering. After the ceremony, a mother stage-whispers to her daughter: "I hope you were listening. Cathy had some good things to say." No, little girl. Don't listen to Guisewite. Rather, struggle, dream.

**Rick Perlstein** received a master's degree in American Culture from the University of Michigan in 1994. He lives in New York City.



I N T H E E N D

## ZEITGUSEWITE



**S**pring commencement, 1994, Michigan Stadium in Ann Arbor. It's a gray, chilly morning, 90 percent chance of rain. Chairs await an orchestra that never arrives because the weather is too miserable. The graduation march is piped in over the loudspeakers instead; circumstances seem to invite that much less pomp. In 1992, George Herbert Walker Bush held forth as commencement speaker; in 1993, Hillary Clinton. Seems this year all the chief execs and first ladies had conflicting engagements, so the University of Michigan booked cartoonist Cathy Guisewite instead.

At the stadium, the rain pelts steadily, and the dean introduces our speaker with a haste that defies decorum. She is an alumna—class of 1972—returning for an honorary doctor of fine arts. You're probably familiar with this doctor's fine art: Her eponymous comic strip is syndicated in 1,200 newspapers. Maybe you read this one a while back: Cathy tells her boss, "I can't start another project until I get this debris cleaned up from last year, Mr. Pinkly." He responds, "You'll just have to stay late, Cathy." She retorts, "I already stay late, Mr. Pinkly." He counters, "Work through lunch." "I already work through lunch." "Come in on weekends." "I already come in on weekends." "Well, then, you'll just have to do it on your own time." Last panel: "WHEN WOULD THAT BE, AND IF IT'S

MINE, WHY HAVEN'T I SEEN ANY OF IT IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS??!" Class of '94, meet your role model.

It ain't the '50s any more, and Cathy clearly won't be giving *that* sort of graduation speech, the kind delivered by larger-than-life soul-stirrers whose bon mots are excerpted every June in *Time* magazine. You know the routine. Big Shot takes the podium, dispenses an opening witticism, wistfully pines for that glorious dawn back when s/he was in your shoes, and then cuts directly to the following story: that yes, the world into which you graduates are to enter is lousy with sin; but then, you are young, idealistic and brimming with promise; and so it is your distinct duty and privilege to be the ones to redeem our fallen polis and fully realize your own happiness in the process; and if that sounds far-fetched, well, look at me, I did it! And in fact, even in the brightest of times, that was a pretty far-fetched story. But commencement addresses are myths, and myths, in Joan Didion's felicitous words, are like "endorphins, a built-in source of natural morphine working to blur the edges of real and to a great extent insoluble problems." Take a hit and be transfigured through the mingling of youthful promise and heroic fulfillment offered up in the alchemy of speaker and audience on graduation day.

Greece had its Homer; France, Jules Michelet's histories;

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